

# I S L A M

a global religion

**RE 215 (AB)**

Mon & Wed 2:30-3:50 PM

Classroom: Ladd 206

**Prof. G. Spinner**

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office: Ladd 321

office phone: 580-8406

office hours: Tues 2:00-3:00,

*or by apt.*

### *Course Description*

This course provides a basic introduction to Islamic scripture, law and spirituality. Our approach is historical, undertaking a critical investigation of both texts and contexts, in an attempt to understand and analyze the lived reality of Islam past and present. Roughly one out of every five people on this planet identify as Muslim, and yet Americans know relatively little about a religious tradition having such a profound influence on world history and culture and which continues to impact contemporary events. Whereas media images tend to distort its message and dilute its meanings, we will give Islam far more careful consideration, approaching this religion as the rich and multi-faceted tradition that it is. Taking a global perspective, we will encounter Islam in action, from Indonesia to Arabia to Senegal to Pakistan to Trinidad (and many points in between). Covering some core beliefs and practices shared by most Muslims, we will emphasize the complexity and diversity of Muslim life, as various Muslim cultures interpret and implement Islam in different ways.

### *Course Materials*

Required books include:

Frederick Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

A recommended text is *The Qur'an*, as translated by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. There are no assigned readings from this book, but you may want to have a copy of the Qur'an around to occasionally consult. This is simply one reliable translation, yet there are certainly others; consult Sells, pp. 231-232, for more information about English renditions of the Qur'an.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.

### *Studying Religion*

In studying Islam as a global "religion," we are selecting certain beliefs, practices and institutions and situating them within an academic rubric, namely that of "Religious Studies." So a few underlying premises of the discipline should be stated at the outset. First, it must be made clear

that any course in Religious Studies intends neither to promote nor demote any type of religious beliefs or activities. Rather, one can distinguish being educated *about* religion from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion. Second, one begins studying any tradition by seeking to understand that tradition as it understands itself, and recognizing that any tradition speaks with a plurality of voices. Third, we are not compelled to agree with the voices encountered in our study, although it is hoped that some may command our respect. Our primary intention in Religious Studies is to think about religion critically, although not unsympathetically. This *critical* approach means being analytical, rather than simply being judgmental; we are not looking to gut-level reactions, but asking instead for measured reflections. Fourth, the study of religion is ideally suited to further our understanding of history, culture and human identity. In learning about religion, we see how religions orient their practitioners in space and time, providing personal meanings and structuring societies. We observe how religions exercise authority over people, even as they empower people to deal with everyday dilemmas or to act under extraordinary circumstances. We discover that religions are not timeless and unchanging, but develop in history, whether viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. We thus find that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as they are *embodied* by those practicing them. In sum, we seek in Religious Studies to uncover important dimensions of the human experience and to subject them to critical inquiry, divested of preconceptions and prejudices.

### ***Course Requirements***

Your grade consists of the following components:

<b>Participation</b>	<b>10 %</b>
<b>Reflection Papers</b>	<b>40 %</b>
<b>First Exam</b>	<b>25 %</b>
<b>Final Exam</b>	<b>25 %</b>
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<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>

While the course will begin with a trio of lectures, we'll quickly move towards a discussion format, where your **participation** is imperative, and for which you will be duly evaluated. So participation is not a "gimme," as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts. So: understand that ***attendance is mandatory***. You should make every effort to always be at class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). Of course, participation is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity.

**Reflection Papers** are short pieces of writing (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you respond to questions that I distribute ahead of time. You will be writing several reflection papers throughout the semester. We will use these papers as jumping off points for discussion, but you will also turn them in, and they will be graded.

**Exams** are take-home essays of moderate length. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

If you think you have a reasonable need for an extension, then it behooves you to make the case for one *before* the assignment is due. Otherwise, late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

To sum up these requirements: clearly, I expect you to work. But I think the workload is appropriate, and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together.

### *Classroom Civility*

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off or remove your ear buds, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

### *Student Disabilities*

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Palamountain Hall.

### *Honor Code*

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

### *Partners in Learning*

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. As stated in the learning goals, we will debate positions and challenge each other. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

# I S L A M

## CLASS & READING SCHEDULE RE 215 / FALL 2012

*Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned.

**CR** = Course Reader

**D** = Denny, Introduction to Islam

- Sept 4. **Introductions:** syllabus, classmates, instructor.
- Sept 9. **Abrahamic Religions before Muhammad.** Reading: D, pp. 15-28 and 32-44.
- Sept 11. **The Prophet Muhammad: His Life & Sunna.**  
Reading: D, pp. 49-72, 150-155 and mid 160-163.
- Sept 16. **After Muhammad: Caliphate, Civil Wars & Empire.**  
Reading: D, pp. 74-95
- Sept 18. **Qur'an. Reading Signs, Heeding Warnings.**  
Readings: D, pp. 130-mid 134. Sells, pp. 1-28, 42-55 and 74-77.  
Listening: Sells, tracks 2 & 23, while consulting pp. 172-173.
- Sept 23. **Qur'anic Recitation.** Reading: Sells, pp. 84-93, 145-157 and 161-165.  
Also read Denny (CR). Listening: tracks 9 & 24, consulting pp. 174-184.
- Sept 25. **Qur'anic Study, Interpretation & Calligraphy.** Readings: D, pp. 139-148.  
Hadith of Gabriel (CR) and Nasr (CR).
- Sept 30. **Pillars. Shahada & Salat.** Readings: D, pp. 99-mid 116. Mattson (CR).  
Listening: Sells, tracks 1 & 32, while consulting pp. 166-171. On You Tube, view the "Step-by-Step Guide to Prayer" posted by Shaykha. It is laid out in seven parts; just watch the first 3 units (*wudu*, reminders & *fajr*), starting with:  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaKb2zX1QBs&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaKb2zX1QBs&feature=relmfu).
- Oct 2. **Pillars. Zakat & Sawm.** Readings: D, pp. 116-121. Armbrust (CR).
- Oct 7. **Pillars. Hajj.** Readings: D, pp. 122-128. Wolf (CR) and Shariati (CR).
- Oct 9. **Pillars. Hajj, continued.** Reading: Wolf and Shariati, second selections (CR).

Oct 7. *Opportunity for extra credit:*

**Yair Horesh**, Greenberg Middle East Scholar in Residence,  
*will be speaking on*, "Far Away from the First Sky":  
Arabic Literary Writing in Western Exile"  
at 7:30 pm in Davis Auditorium.

# I S L A M

## CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *continued*

Oct 8. *Opportunity for extra credit:*

A panel discussion, featuring visiting scholars from Ben-Gurion University, "Understanding the Middle East: Historical and Contemporary Transformations" will be held at 7:30 pm in Davis Auditorium

Oct 14. **Ulama: Lawyers, Theologians & Philosophers.**

Reading: D, pp. mid 166-179, 185, 187-194 and (*optionally*) mid 198-207.  
Also read Ibn Rushd (CR).

Oct 16. **Sufis: Mystics & Saints.** Reading: D, pp. 211-235 and 301-306.

Oct 21. **Sufis: Masters, Disciples & Dervishes.**

Readings: D, pp. 238- top 256. Rumi (CR).

Oct 23. **Sufis: Senegalese Mourides & American Sufis.**

Readings: Roberts & Roberts (CR), Karp (CR) and Babou (CR).

Oct 28. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India.** Reading: Pinault, first selection (CR).

Oct 30. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India (*continued*) & North America.**

Readings: Pinault, second selection (CR) and Schubel (CR).

*This year, Nov 4 marks the New Year of the Islamic calendar.*

*Ashura falls on Nov 14.*

Nov 4. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in Trinidad.** Reading: Korom (CR).

Nov 6. **Living a Muslim Life. Family & Food.** Reading: D, pp. 263-287.

Nov 11. **The Status of Women.** Reading: D, pp. 348-352 and mid 377-379,  
and Wadud (CR).

Nov 13. **Wearing Veils.** Reading: Taylor (CR).

# I S L A M

## CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *concluded*

- Nov 18. **Modern States & Islamic Revivals.** Readings: D, pp. 315-321, mid 330-331, and 341-347. Qutb (CR). Possibly more TBA.
- Nov 20. **Reformers.** Ramadan and Rauf (both in CR).

Nov 25 -27. *No classes held this week:*  
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting,  
followed by Thanksgiving Break.

- Dec 2. **Jihad.** Readings: Cook, Bin Laden, Satha-Anand, and Muhaiyaddeen (all in CR). Also read D, pp. 367-top 371.
- Dec 4. **Progressive Islam.** Reading: D, pp. mid 371-mid 377 and 380. El- Fadl (CR) and Rauf (CR).
- Dec 9. **“Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker”:** Taqwacores.  
Readings: D, pp. mid 352-362, and Knight (CR).
- Dec 11. Conclusions.