

# I S L A M

## a global religion

### RE 215 (AB)

Classroom: Ladd 206

meets: Wed. & Fri.,

8:40-10:00 am

### Prof. G. Spinner

[gspinner@skidmore.edu](mailto:gspinner@skidmore.edu)

office: Ladd 205 A

office phone: 518-580-8406

office hrs: Wed 11:00-noon, Thurs  
1:00-2:00 pm, *or by appointment.*

### *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 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 Study Qur'an*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. 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 one among several reliable translations; consult Sells, pp. 231-232, for more information about English renditions of the Qur'an.) Another nice feature of this edition is it provides access to various interpretations of the Quran, which is quite helpful.

**All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.** The instructor has tried to balance the work of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, and to point to scholarly work beyond the Anglo-American academy.

## *Learning Goals*

By taking this course, students will be able to:

- (i.) identify the major tenets and practices of a global religion;
- (ii.) understand the history of this religion and its impact on global culture;
- and (iii.) disambiguate some of the more prominent strands of the Muslim tradition, such that Islam does not appear monolithic or univocal.

## *Studying Religion*

In studying Islam as a global “religion,” we are selecting certain beliefs, practices and institutions and situating them within a scholarly rubric, namely that of Religious Studies. So a few underlying premises of the academic discipline should be stated, here 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. Yet 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 within history, whether viewed in its epic sweep or in its quotidian specificity. We thus find that religions are *embedded* in particular cultures, just as religions 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>30 %</b>
<b>First Exam</b>	<b>30 %</b>
<b>Final Exam</b>	<b>30 %</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>

While the course begins with a trio of lectures, we will quickly move towards a discussion format, where your **participation** is imperative, and for which you will be duly evaluated. So participation is not a default setting, because it requires a conscientious effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this can will be achieved through 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 successfully 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.

### *Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload*

As the above section makes quite clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend 3 hours outside of class reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 9 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments. Be assured that **you need to do all of the assigned readings**. There is no way to

understand the subject and to fully participate in class if you skip, or skimp, on this most fundamental of labors.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent* - a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on a major paper, then you may exercise that option. (This option only applies for major papers, such as midterms; it is not available for shorter, reflection papers, and, due to time constraints, for finals). If I hand you back a paper with a lower grade, then you can choose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

### *Classroom Civility*

Do not be late to class, do not leave the room during that time, and do not be rude while here. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, yet both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will 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.

Please turn off your devices before you come to class. Take off headphones, remove ear buds, and stow anything unconnected to our class well out of sight. I will start out the semester 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 screens 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 Starbuck Center.

### ***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. We will debate positions and challenge each other. Yet 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

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## CLASS & READING SCHEDULE RE 215 / FALL 2017

*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 6. **Introductions:** syllabus, classmates, instructor.
- Sept 8. **Abrahamic Religions before Muhammad.** Reading: D, pp. 15-28 and 32-44.
- Sept 13. **The Prophet Muhammad: His Life & Sunna.**  
Reading: D, pp. 49-72, 150-155 and mid 160-163.
- Sept 15. **After Muhammad: Caliphate, Civil Wars & Empire.**  
Reading: D, pp. 74-95.
- Sept 20. **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 22. *No class:* Rosh ha-Shanah.
- This year, Sept. 22 corresponds to the New Year of the Islamic calendar.  
Ashura then falls on Oct. 10.*
- Sept 27. **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 29. **Qur'anic Study, Interpretation & Calligraphy.** Readings: D, pp. 139-148.  
Hadith of Gabriel (CR) and Nasr (CR).
- Oct 4. **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 6. **Pillars. Zakat & Sawm.** Readings: D, pp. 116-121.

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**CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *continued***

- Oct 11. **Pillars. Hajj.** Readings: D, pp. 122-128. Wolf (CR) and Shariati (CR).  
Oct 13. **Pillars. Hajj, *continued*.** Reading: Wolf and Shariati, second selections (CR).
- Oct 18. **Ulama: Lawyers, Theologians & Philosophers.**  
Reading: D, pp. mid 166-179, 185, 187-194 and (*optionally*) mid 198-207.  
Also read Ibn Rushd (CR)
- Oct 20. **Sufis: Mystics & Saints.** Reading: D, pp. 211-235 and 301-306.
- Oct 25. **Sufis: Masters, Disciples & Dervishes.**  
Readings: D, pp. 238- top 256. Rumi (CR).
- Oct 27. **Sufis: Senegalese Mourides & American Sufis.**  
Readings: Roberts & Roberts (CR), Karp (CR) and Babou (CR).
- Nov 1. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India.** Reading: Pinault, first selection (CR).  
Nov 3. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India (*continued*) & North America.**  
Readings: Pinault, second selection (CR) and Schubel (CR).
- Nov 8. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in Trinidad.** Reading: Korom (CR).  
Nov 10. **Women and Status in Islam.** Reading: D, pp. 268-mid 274 and 348-352.  
Wadud (CR).
- Nov 15. **Gendering Taqwa: On Veiling.** Reading: D, pp. mid 371-380. Taylor (CR).  
Nov 17. *No class: American Academy of Religion meets.*
- Thanksgiving Break.*
- Nov 29. **Modern States & Islamic Revivals.** Readings: D, pp. 315-321, mid 330-331,  
and 341-347. Qutb (CR).  
Dec 1. **Reformers.** Reading: D, pp. mid 371-mid 377 and 380.  
Ramadan and Rauf (both in CR).
- This year, Dec. 1 marks Milad an-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet.*
- Dec 6. **Jihad.** Readings: Satha-Anand, Muhaiyaddeen, Cook, Bin Laden, and  
[optionally] Creswell & Haykel (all in CR). Also read D, pp. 367-top 371.  
Dec 8. **“Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker”:** Taqwacore.  
Readings: D, pp. mid 352-362, and Knight  
(excerpts from two books, both in CR).

Conclusions to the course.