

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
office: Ladd 205 A
office phone: 518-580-8406
office phone: (518) 580-8406
office hrs: Wed 10:15-11:15 am,
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 realities 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 that has made such a profound influence on world history and culture and which continues to impact current 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 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. Additionally, each student will undertake an individualized project that considers how contemporary media depict Islam.

Course Materials

Required books include:

Frederick Denny, An Introduction to Islam, 4th edition.

Michael Sells, Approaching the Qur'an, 2nd edition.

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;
- (iii.) disambiguate some of the more prominent strands of the Muslim tradition, such that Islam does not appear monolithic or univocal;
- and* (iv.) develop a critical perspective on consuming media.

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 of them 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:

Participation	7 %
Reflection Papers	13 %
First Exam	25 %
Second Exam	25 %
Final Project	30 %
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Total	100 %

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 will not be achieved through half measures and sullen efforts.

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. The **Final Project**, which involves analyzing how different media outlets portray Islam, will also be described in greater detail in a separate handout.

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 even a brief glance at the above sections makes 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.

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 the content of your writing, 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 an essay, then you may exercise that option. (Due to time constraints, this option does not apply to the final essay of the semester). If I hand you back an essay with a grade of B- or lower, then you can chose 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 expect you to stay in the classroom the whole time that class is in session. Please anticipate bodily needs, and minimize having to leave. Excuse yourself for an emergency, but not simply as a matter of convenience.

Address your instructor and classmates with respect, and respond with some measure of goodwill. Even as we try to engage each other in open and honest ways, we still want our speech and our demeanor to reflect courtesy, even kindness, for our interlocutors. Your Golden Rule of thumb here: even when perturbed or vehemently disagreeing, consider the feelings of those present and treat others as you would want to be treated yourself.

All electronic devices must be turned off, and stowed away. Digital distraction has become a serious problem in our culture, allowing our attention to easily drift. We aim to make the classroom a space where we engage each other, and focus squarely on our subject, rather than check our messages or browse social media.

Academic Integrity

There is a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Skidmore articulates and enforces an Honor Code, and any suspected infractions will be reported to the office of Student Academic Affairs. As the Skidmore Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations, make sure the work you submit is entirely your own.

Copying from others, submitting the work of other people, or submitting your same work for two different courses all constitute forms of cheating. Any fact, word, or thought that originated with somebody else should be properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such.

Student Disabilities

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

Title IX

Skidmore College faculty and staff are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. We consider sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal regulations.

If you choose to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that person is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator. That administrator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, The Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates are all options available to the student. For further information, consult [://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/](http://www.skidmore.edu/sgbm/) or contact Joel Aure, Title IX Coordinator, or Sarah Green, Deputy Coordinator

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 want to cultivate a passion for learning and a commitment to critical inquiry, as well as the ability to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I 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 own expectations clear to me, letting me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. Please do not hesitate to contact me about 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 2019

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 6. **Decolonizing the Study of Islam.** Reading: Said (CR). For background, watch the first 28 mins of “Edward Said On Orientalism,” on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g&app=desktop

*This year, the Islamic New Year began on Aug 30,
and Ashura falls on Sept. 9.*

- Sept 11. **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 18. **After Muhammad: Caliphate, Civil Wars & Empires.**
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 19. “Where has ISIS gone?”
A lecture by Nimrod Hurvitz,
Greenberg Middle East Scholar-in-Residence.
Gannett Auditorium, 7:30 pm.

- Sept 25. **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 27. **Qur’anic Study, Interpretation & Calligraphy.** Readings: D, pp. 139-148.
Wilkens (CR). Hadith of Gabriel (CR). Nasr (CR).

RE 215 CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *continued*

- Oct 2. **Pillars. Shahada & Salat.** Readings: D, pp. 99-mid 116. Mattson (CR).
Listening: Sells, tracks 1 & 32, while consulting pp. 166-171. Watch the “Step-by-Step Guide to Prayer” posted on You Tube by Shaykha. It is laid out in seven parts; just watch the first two units (*wudu* & reminders), starting with:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaKb2zX1QBs&feature=relmfu>
and then view whichever of the remaining five units interest you.
- Oct 4. **Pillars. Zakat & Sawm.** Readings: D, pp. 116-121.
- Oct 9. *No class: Yom Kippur.*
- Oct 11. **Pillars. Hajj.** Readings: D, pp. 122-128. Shariati (CR).
- Oct 16. **Pillars. Hajj, *continued.*** Reading: Shariati, second selections (CR).
- Oct 18. **Sufis: Mystics & Saints.** Reading: D, pp. 211-235 and 301-306.
- Oct 23. **Sufis: Masters, Disciples & Dervishes.**
Readings: D, pp. 238- top 256. Rumi (CR).
- Oct 24. *First exam is due by 3:00 pm.*
- Oct 25. *No class: Study Day*
- Oct 30. **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 6. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in India (*continued*) & North America.**
Readings: Pinault, second selection (CR) and Schubel (CR).
- Nov 8. **Blood & Tears: Muharram in Trinidad.** Accessed through the Lucy catalog, Alexander Street is streaming the documentary, “Hosay Trinidad.” Watch the first 16 minutes, and we will continue viewing in class. Reading: Korom (CR).

This year, Nov 9 marks Mawlid al-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet.

RE 215 CLASS & READING SCHEDULE, *concluded*

- Nov 13. **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 19. *Second exam due by 3:00 pm.*
- Nov 20. **Islamic Revivals & Reforms.** Readings: D, pp. 315-321 and 341-347.
Qutb & Rauf (both in CR).
- Nov 22. **Taqwa Behind Bars: Race and Religion in American Prisons.**
Reading: D, pp. bottom 355-mid 359.

Thanksgiving Break.

- Dec 4. **Jihad.** Readings: Satha-Anand, Muhaiyaddeen, Cook, Bin Laden, and
[optionally] Creswell & Haykel (all in CR). Also read D, pp. 367-top 371.
- Dec 6. **“Muhammad Was a Punk Rocker.”** Accessed through the Lucy catalog,
Kanopy is streaming Omar Majeed’s “Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk
Islam.” Watch up to 42:00 (when they go to Pakistan), although you can
finish the film if you would like. Readings: D, pp. mid 352-362,
and Knight (excerpts from two books, both in CR).
- Dec 11. Conclusions.

Dec 18. *Final project is due by noon.*