

World Cultures: Islamic Societies
Tuesday and Thursday, 2-3:15, Silver 714
Spring, 2007

Course objectives: This course is a thematic introduction to many of the events, figures, texts and ideas that have been central to Islamic thought and identity over the centuries. While we will study many major historical events, particularly in the early centuries of the Islamic era, the course is not intended as a comprehensive historical survey; we will not have complete chronological or geographical coverage. Instead, we will focus on some of the pivotal moments that have been most meaningful in the eyes of later generations of Muslims. Although we will evaluate evidence for and against the historical accuracy of the narratives we study, we will be as concerned with the ways in which events are recalled, and the significance with which they are invested, as with their factual truth. By looking at key moments of creativity and conflict, we will develop an understanding of how Muslims of the past defined themselves in contrast with others and elaborated their sense of what it means to follow Islam.

Course requirements:

Map quiz: 5%

Reaction pieces: 20%

- You must submit reactions to 15 of the primary readings, at least 7 of which must be submitted before spring break. Your reaction piece should respond to the question(s) presented under the heading “reaction,” immediately beneath the reading assignment. It should be roughly one page in length, single spaced (approximately 250 words), and should be as concise and substantive as possible. Your reaction paper must be submitted to a preceptor, in class, on the day on which the relevant reading is discussed in the lecture. No reaction paper will be accepted after the corresponding lecture.

Short essay (4-5 pages): 15%

- Choose one of your reaction pieces and expand it into a short essay

Essay (5-6 pages): 20%

- Select one of the assigned themes (to be discussed in class) and analyze the relevant class readings.

Class participation (based on performance in recitations): 10%

Final exam: 30%

Readings: The textbook for the course is Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, which is available at the NYU Bookstore and in the Bobst Library Reference Room (DS35.63 .L37). The textbook will provide you with a basic factual framework for the course, as well as providing some perspectives on

scholarship in Islamic studies. However, the most important readings (which will provide the intellectual substance of the course, the material for your discussion sessions and the sources for your written assignments) are primary sources in English translation. These readings are available through the “Course Documents” tab on the Blackboard site for the course.

Schedule of topics and readings

Tuesday, January 16

Introduction

Part I: Early Islamic history

Thursday, January 18

The Pre-Islamic Near East

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 3-9; *Epic of the Kings*, pp. 5-25

Reaction: What cultural and religious values are expressed in this selection? What is the significance of political power? The role of religion?

Tuesday, January 23

Pre-Islamic Arabia

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 10-17; *Book of Idols*, pp. 5-26

Reaction: The writer of this piece is a Muslim looking back at pre-Islamic Arabian religious beliefs and practices. How does he know about pre-Islamic Arabia, and what value and significance does it have in his eyes?

Thursday, January 25 **Map quiz (in class)**

The Life of the Prophet Muhammad

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 18-30; Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 150-3, 597-601

Reaction: The two selections from Ibn Ishaq depict two different encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims. In one, Muslim refugees express their religious convictions and their relationship with the pagan Meccans to the Christian ruler of Abyssinia; in the second, a pagan Arabian poet sees the light and composes an ode in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. How do these two texts construct Muslim identity in contrast with pre-Islamic Arabian and Christian religion and society?

Tuesday, January 30

The Rightly Guided caliphs

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 45-47; *al-Fakhri*, pp. 69-99

Reaction: What are the sources of the legitimacy of the first four caliphs, as represented in this text? Is their legitimacy religious, political, or both?

Thursday, February 1

The Islamic Conquests

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 31-44; *Epic of the Kings*, pp. 413-19; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XII, pp. 63-73

Reaction: What themes and values emerge from these accounts of the Muslim conquest of Iran? How do the perspectives of the two authors differ?

Tuesday, February 6

The Umayyads

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 47-51, 67-71; *al-Fakhri*, pp. 100-127

Reaction: How does this representation of the Umayyad dynasty contrast with the same author's depiction of the "Rightly Guided" caliphs, which we read last week? What is the author expressing about the religious and political legitimacy of the Umayyads?

Thursday, February 8

Shi'ism : History and theory of the imamate

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 115-119; *Kitab al-Irshad*, pp. 524-30, 541-8

Reaction: What is the function and significance of an Imam in the worldview of this Shi'ite text? What is the role of the "Qa'im"?

Tuesday, February 13

The Abbasids

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 51-66, 73-77; *Meadows of Gold*, pp. 175-197

Reaction: What kinds of religious and political legitimacy are associated with the 'Abbasid caliph in these narratives? (You may want to compare and contrast with the themes you found in our readings on the Rightly Guided and Umayyad caliphs.)

Part II: Islamic thought and practice

Thursday, February 15

The Qur'an 1

Reading: Qur'an, chapters 84-114 and ch. 16

Reaction: What core themes do you find in these early revelations from the Qur'an?

Tuesday, February 20

The Qur'an 2

Reading: Brown, ch. 5; Qur'an, chapter 3

Reaction: What relationship among Judaism, Christianity and Islam is expressed in this chapter of the Qur'an?

Thursday, February 22

The five "pillars" of Islam

Reading: Denny, *An Introduction to Islam*, pp. 99-124; narrative of Ibn Jubayr from Wolfe, *One Thousand Roads to Mecca*

Reaction: How does Ibn Jubayr's hajj narrative express his values as a Muslim? How does his account express his sense of the unity and solidarity – and the diversity and fragmentation – of the Islamic community?

Tuesday, February 27

The Hadith

Reading: Bukhari, *Moral Teachings of Islam: Prophetic traditions from the Adab al-mufrad*, pp. 44-64; *hadith* texts on zakat, Calder pp. 36-49

Reaction: What kinds of concerns of the early Muslim community do these reports express? Based on your reading of these texts, what is distinctive about hadith as a medium for expressing Islamic values and rules?

Thursday, March 1

First essay due (in class)

Islamic law 1

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 81-87, 134-137; "The Kadi Abu Yusuf"

Reaction: What image do these texts represent of the ideal Islamic court judge (*qadi*)? What should be the relationship between the judge and the political authorities?

Tuesday, March 6

Islamic law 2

Reading: Ralph Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses*, pp. 11-60

Reaction: When coffee was first introduced to Muslim society, religious authorities took sharply divergent positions on its religious acceptability. Which was more important in the controversy, revealed texts and abstract legal reasoning or political and social factors? Was there a single "correct" answer to the question of coffee's status under Islamic law?

Thursday, March 8

Theology

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 77-80, 87-90, 99-102; "The Trial (*Mihna*) over the Createdness of the Qur'an"

Reaction: Why does it matter if the Qur'an is "created" or not, and why does this question concern the caliph? What people and groups are claiming religious authority here, and what is the basis of their authority?

Spring break

Tuesday, March 20

Sufism 1

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 90-94, 158-166; Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, pp. 32-51

Reaction: What underlying attitudes do these two early mystics have in common? What distinguishes their attitudes from those we haven't encountered so far? What makes them distinctively Muslim?

Thursday, March 22

Sufism 2

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 137-141, 158-166; *Secrets of God's Mystical Oneness*, pp. 133-152.

Reaction: What kinds of concrete power, influence and organization emerge from the mystical insights of Abu Sa'id ibn Abi al-Khayr, the subject of this text?

Tuesday, March 27

Popular Islam

Reading: Rabghuzi, "The Stories of the Prophets," pp. 522-9

Reaction: How does the vision of the Prophet expressed in this text differ from the one we encountered in Ibn Ishaq's biography at the beginning of the semester? How might an individual believer react differently to a narrative of this kind?

Thursday, March 29

Islamic philosophy

Reading: Lapidus, 169-172; "Hayy ibn Yaqzan"

Reaction: What basic religious and/or intellectual messages do you think are communicated by this allegorical narrative? Why might the author have chosen to frame his message in this indirect form, rather than writing a straightforward philosophical essay?

Tuesday, April 3

The post-'Abbasid Middle East and Islamic political thought

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 106-122, 147-155; "Hilal al-Sabi on the Abbasid Court"

Reaction: What can we learn about the religious and political significance of the caliph from the description of this ceremony? How has the role of the caliph changed in comparison to the periods we have studied so far?

Part III: Encounters and responses

Thursday, April 5

The Crusades and the Mongol invasions

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 287 (bottom)-290, 226-233 (middle); selections from Ibn al-Athir and Juvaini, MacNeill, pp. 249-72

Reading: In what ways is the Mongol invasion a challenge to the religious worldviews of Ibn al-Athir and Juvaini? How, based on your reading, does the impact of the Mongol invasions compare with that of the Crusades?

Draft of second essay due in class

Tuesday, April 10

Revival and reform, eighteenth and nineteenth century

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 400-424; *The Caliph's Sister*, pp. 126-135 (selections from the works of Nana Asma'u, sister of 'Uthman Don Fodio)

Reaction: What can we infer about the religious knowledge and practices of Nana Asma'u's audience? What is she trying to achieve in her religious poetry?

Thursday, April 12

Encountering Europe

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 250-268, 275-282, 489-497; *Disorienting Encounters: Travels of a Moroccan Scholar in France in 1845-1846*, pp. 142-161;

Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letters 26 and 28

Reaction: The first selection is from an authentic nineteenth-century account by a Moroccan Muslim visiting Paris; the second consists of two fictional letters written in the voice of an imaginary Persian man by the French political theorist Montesquieu, in 1721. What ways of imagining the Muslim "East," the European "West," and the relationship between the two are reflected in these two selections? What social or cultural values are at stake?

Tuesday, April 17

Islamic modernism

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 498-519; Gatje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis*, pp. 248-61 (commentary of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida on verse 4:3 of the Qur'an)

Reaction: What kind of an audience do Abduh and Rida envision for their commentary on this verse of the Qur'an? What kinds of cultural and political concerns seem to drive their interpretation? What makes their interpretation distinctively modern?

Thursday, April 19

Islamic militancy

Reading: Lapidus, pp. 519-534; Zainab al-Ghazali, *Return of the Pharaoh*, pp. 25-42

Reaction: What is Zainab al-Ghazali's religious and political agenda? How does it respond to her specific circumstances? What is the role of gender in her attitudes?

Final draft of second essay due in class

Tuesday, April 24

Gender issues

Reading: Azizah al-Hibri, "An Introduction to Muslim Women's Rights," in *Windows of Faith*, pp. 51-71; Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, pp. 33-48

Reaction: What do you think causes these two Muslim women to take such widely divergent stances towards issues of gender and Islam? In what ways is each view compelling?

Thursday, April 26

Contemporary questions

Reading: Basheer M. Nafi, "Fatwa and War: On the Allegiance of the American Muslim Soldiers in the Aftermath of September 11," *Islamic Law and Society* 11 (2004), pp. 78-116

Reaction: Why is it particularly challenging to define Islamic laws and identities in the contemporary world?