

College Core Curriculum

Cultures and Contexts: Islamic Societies

Medieval Islamic History and Culture

Spring 2014

Professor Everett Rowson

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Kevorkian Building, 50 Washington Square South, second floor, room 304

Office hours by appointment

Graduate Teaching Assistants (all office hours held on the second floor of the Kevorkian):

Matthew Keegan (mlk.keegan@gmail.com, W 12:30-1:30)

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Ehsan Siahpoush (ss5367@nyu.edu, F 3:30-4:30)

This course will explore various aspects of the Islamic world from about the year 600 to about 1300. It postulates that despite very large variations in culture across time and space it is meaningful to speak of a single Islamic civilization during this period, and will ask why. This is not a religious studies course, although the dominance of the religion of Islam, in one way or another, serves to define and unify the societies under examination, and religion will be a major topic of study. But attention will also be paid to philosophy and science, literature and music, art and architecture, all within a roughly chronological frame. The majority of the assigned reading will be English translations of Arabic works written by the inhabitants of this world themselves.

One of the chief objectives of the course will be to help students appreciate just how different a culture different from their own—and especially one in the distant past—can be, and yet make perfect sense to its participants. By reading, analyzing, and discussing what those participants have to say about a myriad of topics they should gain insights into how cultures in general, including their own, work. Although the modern world is not included in the course, study of the Islamic past will also enhance students' understanding of Islam and Islamic cultures today.

One book is required for purchase for this course:

Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405* (2004)

This book, together with the lectures, will provide the essential historical scaffolding for the other assigned readings, which will be from primary sources (that is, modern English translations of works written in Arabic in the medieval period).

During the first half of the course the weekly primary readings will be taken from the following book:

Eric Schroeder, *Muhammad's People: An Anthology of Muslim Civilization* (originally published in 1955, 2002 Dover paperback)

This book describes itself as “a mosaic translation,” and is made up entirely of translated Arabic texts, arranged both chronologically and topically. It is unfortunately out of print, but the weekly readings from it, as well as from other sources through the second half of the course, will be available on NYU Classes.

Course requirements and grading

Attendance at both lectures and recitation, **and active participation** in recitation (**15% of grade**)

There will be attendance sheet to be initialed at lectures. Passivity at recitation will be problematical. More than two absences from lecture and more than one from recitation will result in at least a one-grade reduction.

Four Response Papers (20%)

Three-page essays discussing a particular section of the primary readings will be due on Wednesdays four times in the course of the semester. The specific assignment for each will be specified in lecture the Thursday before it is due. Submission is to be made electronically to your Graduate Student Teacher. Late submission will be subject to a one-letter reduction and **must** be submitted in hard copy, at the office of Department Washington Square South and Sullivan Street, entrance on Sullivan), where the GSTs have mailboxes.

Paper on visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (10%)

Each student will be required to visit the Islamic galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and then submit a six-page essay dealing with some aspect of what has been observed. (More specific instructions will be available later in the semester.)

Midterm Examination (20%)

In class, March 13, with both objective and essay components.

Final Examination (35%)

Thursday, May 15, 4:00-5:50 pm. No make-ups permitted for either the mid-term or the final except in cases of dire medical necessity.

Please note that all cell phones must be turned *off* at both lectures and recitations. No eating or drinking (except water) is permitted in either venue. Note-taking on computers is permitted, but indulging in other computer activities, such as checking emailing, texting, or web surfing, is extremely rude and will not be tolerated.

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated and will result in a grade of F (at least).

9. 4/1, 3 Sufism; interaction of religious currents; al-Ghazali
Schroeder 521-554
al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, in William H. McNeill and
Marilyn Waldman, *The Islamic World*, 206-239
Response Paper due April 2
10. 4/8, 10 Court culture; literature
Schroeder, 611-644, 691-704
Robert Irwin, *Nights & Horses & the Desert: An Anthology of
Classical Arabic Literature*, 148-193
11. 4/15, 17 Personal status: gender and sexuality; slavery
al-Jahiz, "Boasting Match over Maids and Youths," in *Nine Essays
of al-Jahiz*, trans. William M. Hutchins, 139-166
A. F. L. Beeston, trans., *The Epistle on Singing-Girls of Jahiz*, 12-38
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., article "Abd"
Response Paper due April 16
12. 4/22, 24 Art and architecture; music
Robert Irwin, *Islamic Art in Context*, 57-102
13. 4/29, 5/1 Twelfth and thirteenth centuries; Crusades; Black Death
Egger, chapters 7-9
Usama ibn Munqidh, *The Book of Contemplation*, trans.
Paul Cobb (selection)
Metropolitan Museum Response Paper due April 30
14. 5/6, 8 Fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; Mongols and Mamluks
Egger, chapters 10-11

Final Examination May 15, 4:00-5:50