Introduction to Islam  
RELS 143/NELC 136  

TuTh 1030 am to 12 pm  

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Description:  
This course is an introduction to Islam as a religion as it exists in societies of the past as well as the present. It explores the many ways in which Muslims have interpreted and put into practice the prophetic message of Muhammad through historical and social analyses of varying theological, philosophical, legal, political, mystical and literary writings, as well as through visual art and music. The aim of the course is to develop a framework for explaining the sources and symbols through which specific experiences and understandings have been signified as Islamic, both by Muslims and by other peoples with whom they have come into contact, with particular emphasis given to issues of gender, religious violence, and changes in beliefs and behaviors which have special relevance for contemporary society.  

Readings:  
The following books are available at the Penn Book Center at 34th and Sansom:  

- Jamal J. Elias, *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*  
- Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*  
- John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*  
- Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*  

A xerox packet of additional materials is available from Wharton Reprographics. Other material is located on the Blackboard site for the course.  

Course Requirements:  
Class Participation (15%)  
Despite being introductory, this course will not be conducted with a pure lecture format. Rather, class discussion will be frequent and you will be expected to engage both with the material and with your classmates. As a result, attendance and punctuality are expected. More than two unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade.  

One-page Responses (5% each)  
You will be asked to write two short response papers to the audiovisual assignments over the course of the semester. These one-page responses are informal in style and can be submitted as emails (as an attachment). Responses are due, at the latest, by midnight on the Sunday after they are assigned.
Midterm Exam (20%)

In-class on March 23rd.

Two Short Essays (10% each)

Due on February 9th and April 13th. For these essays you will respond to assigned questions that will be given to you at least one week prior to the due date. The questions will be broad and allow you to show how you have assimilated the range of topics discussed in class and in the readings. Extensions will be granted with prior approval, otherwise late papers will effect your grade.

Final Exam (35%)

The final will be scheduled during the exam period and will be an essay exam. You will be given a series of questions in advance which ask you to synthesize as well as apply the material from class. You will be asked to answer 3 questions from among the list provided, two shorter (each worth 25 points) and one longer (worth 50 points).

Classes and Readings:

January 14th: Introduction and Topical Overview

An overview of the place of Islam in the contemporary world and in history as well as an introduction to the importance of religion as a means of understanding society and the human condition.

January 19th: Arabia at the Time of Muhammad

An overview of Arab society at the time of Muhammad, with particular emphasis on social and religious conditions and the relationship of Arabia to neighboring regions of the world.


January 21st to 26th: The Life of Muhammad

Muhammad’s life before and after the beginning of his prophetic mission. The place of myth in the formation of religious biographies. An overview of the events that led to enduring sectarian splits among Muslims.

Required: Ernst, Following Muhammad, pp. 73-92; Renard, Seven Doors to Islam.

January 28th to February 2nd: The Veneration of Muhammad in Islamic Society

A discussion of the place held by Muhammad in Muslim memory and practice across sectarian divides, including a study of hymns and children’s songs in the modern world.

Required: A. Schimmel, And Muhammad is His Messenger (Xerox packet); listening to “Praise Song of Muhammad,” no. 1 and no. 2, in folder “Praise Songs” on Blackboard; read translations of the songs in the same folder on Blackboard.

*Assignment: 5-page paper assigned February 2nd, due February 9th.
February 4th to 9th: **The Qur’an**
An overview of the history and nature of the primary scripture of Islam. A study of its contents, aesthetics of its structure and the importance of listening to it (rather than simply reading it).


February 11th: **Hadith and quasi-Scriptural Texts**
The place of formal accounts of Muhammad’s life, sayings and behavior in the formation of Islamic ethics and law.

**Required:** “Text” in Elias, *Key Themes*, pp. 321-335; Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*.

February 16th to 18th: **Muslim Doctrine**
An overview and discussion of the role of doctrine in Islam, as well as a systematic treatment of central Muslim doctrines, with emphasis on those concerning God and the nature of prophecy.

**Required:** “God” and “Prophecy” in Elias, *Key Themes*, pp. 161-181, 281-303.

February 23rd to 25th: **Muslim Ritual**
An overview and discussion of the nature of key Muslim rituals and an exploration of the place of ritual in human life.


March 2nd: **Popular Piety**
A close look at examples of Muslim religious practices in the popular or informal realm as a way of appreciating the place of religion in everyday life.

**Required:** A. Rippin, *Textual Sources for Islam* (Xerox packet); J. Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*; Listen to music tracks in folder “Popular Piety” on Blackboard.

March 4th: **The Scholastic Tradition: Theology and Ethics**
The rise of scholastic traditions in Islamic society, with emphasis on the role of theology (*kalam*) in the formation of Islamic ethics.

**Required:** Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, pp. 107-130; Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*.

March 9th to March 11th: **The Development and Nature of Law**
A study of the formation and use of Shari’a law.

March 16th to 18th: **Mysticism and Sufism**  
An overview of mystical ideas, Sufism as a form of social organization, and the place of mysticism and Sufism in the development of arts and literature in Islamic societies.  
**Required:** Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, pp. 163-181; Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam*; listen to musical tracks in folder “Sufism” on Blackboard.

*March 23rd:* Mid-term Exam.

March 25th: **Authority and the Nature of Government**  
The nature and function of institutions of religious and social authority such as the caliphate, imamate, and Sufi shaykhs. Shifts in the nature of authority in modern times.  

March 31st to April 1st: **Just War and Jihad**  
The nature of Jihad as a concept of personal spiritual versus collective military struggle. The relationship between the notion of Jihad as a religious obligation and just war theory.  

April 6th: **Contemporary Issues: Warfare and Violence**  
An examination of the relationship between classical Muslim notions of Jihad and the modern ideologies of legitimate violence espoused by radical Muslim leaders.  

*Assignment:* 5-page paper assigned April 6th, due April 13th.

April 8th to April 13th: **Muslims and Non-Muslims**  
The place of Islam in the modern world, especially in terms of the ways in which Muslims negotiate their place in European and American society.  

April 15th - April 20th: **Women and Constructions of Gender**  
Notions of gender and the body in Islamic thought. The place of women in Islamic law and society. Family law.  
**Required:** “Body” and “Gender” in Elias, *Key Themes*, pp. 72-92, 141-160; Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, pp. 142-150; A. Wudud, “Qur’an and Woman” (Xerox packet).

April 22nd: **Contemporary Issues: The Veil**  
A discussion of the veil and veiling as a powerful symbol in contestations among Muslims and between Muslims and Western societies.  
**Required:** Newspaper articles in folder “Veil” on Blackboard.
April 27th: Conclusion

*Assignment: 5-page paper assigned October 28th, due November 4th.