

**HONR 290: Reading the Qur'an**  
Spring 2019  
MWF, 12:00-1:05pm, Goldspohn 33

Professor: Adam Kotsko, akotsko@noctrl.edu  
Office: Seybert 102 (far northeast corner of campus, across from chapel)  
Office Hours: 9:15-10:15 MWF, 2:30-3:30 MW, or by appointment

**Course Description**

This course is an intensive study of the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an. Revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early 600s, the Qur'an decisively shaped Islamic society, law, and literature as well as religious practices and beliefs. Among Muslims, the original Arabic text is considered a miracle in itself, a word of literary beauty on par with how English-speakers might think of a combination of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. This term, we will read through the entire text of the Qur'an in English translation, generally following an approximation of the chronological order of their revelation, accompanied by biblical parallels, selected readings from the earliest biography of the Prophet, and a collection of traditional commentaries on the text.

**Course Goals**

After completing this course, students will be able to

- give an account of the content, themes, and literary style of the Qur'an
- connect passages of the Qur'an to their original historical context
- use and evaluate contemporary scholarly work on the Qur'an
- relate key stories in the Qur'an to previous versions that appear in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament
- relate and assess differing views on the historical and theological place of women in Islamic society in light of the Qur'an

**Course Readings**

Hamza, Rizvi, and Mayer, eds., *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries*, Volume I: *The Nature of the Divine* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008). [ISBN: 978-0199600595]

*The Qur'an*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford UP, 2004). [ISBN: 978-0199535958]

Sells, Michael, ed. and trans., *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, 2nd ed. (White Cloud Press, 2007). [ISBN: 978-1883991692]

Students should also gain access to a Bible of their choice; a recommended version is included on the bookstore page. Other readings will be provided via Blackboard.

**Course Requirements**

Each student's grade will be based equally on class participation (50%) and written work (50%).

**Class participation** presupposes careful and thorough preparation and serious intellectual involvement in class discussion. Students should come to class not only having read the text through, but having underlined, taken notes, and scanned over the marked text at least one

additional time after the initial reading. On the basis of such preparation, students should be prepared for an intensive, text-focused discussion.

My expectation for class participation is that every member of class will be able to contribute with remarks and citations that are on-topic and reflect solid preparation for class. A student who meets that baseline will receive a grade in the **B range** for their participation portion. Students whose contribution is notably lacking—for instance, those who speak very little, who give no evidence of having done the reading carefully, who consistently change the topic in a disruptive way, or whose primary contributions are jokes or personal anecdotes—will receive a participation grade in the **C or D range**. Students who distinguish themselves through some particular service—such as consistently contributing new topics that shape the discussion, serving as a resource for navigating the text, or making a special effort to draw in quieter classmates—will qualify themselves for a participation grade in the **A range**.

The baseline condition for class participation is of course physical presence in class. Absences not only affect the individual student, but the entire group, and the same is true of habitual lateness. Punctual attendance should be regarded as mandatory. Lateness will count against a student's participation for that session, and in extreme cases will be treated as the equivalent of an absence. Particularly in a ten-week term, a small number of absences can quickly add up to a significant percentage of class time missed (10% for 3 absences, 20% for 6). An increasing number of absences carries with it increasing consequences, which are as follows:

- 1-2 absences No grade penalty, in recognition of our shared human frailties. (If students miss fewer than two classes, however, then in cases where a student is at the threshold between two grades, the professor will go with the higher one.)
- 3-5 absences A half letter grade is deducted from the student's final grade for each absence; this penalty may be lifted by doing an absence make-up for each missed class.
- 6-8 absences For each absence, the student *must* complete an absence make-up (described below) to avoid failing the course, and a half letter grade penalty is imposed on the student's final grade which *cannot* be made up.
- 9 absences Automatic failure of the course.

In order to make up for an absence, students must visit a museum or attend a cultural or academic event relevant to the content of the course. They must write a reflection on this experience (at least one *full* page, double spaced), relating it in some way to material that they have studied as part of the Shimer core curriculum. Absence make-ups must be completed **within three weeks** of the absence being made up. Students have ample opportunities to attend events on the North Central campus, in Naperville, or in Chicago. Hence there should be no difficulty in finding an appropriate event or time for a museum visit.

**Written work** will take two forms: a series of short papers that will serve as the basis for in-class presentations, and a final paper on a topic of the student's choice.

Each student must write three **focus papers**, which will each count as 5% of their final grade. The purpose of these papers is to open and orient our discussion for a particular class session, and as such they will be presented orally. The papers should be 2-3 double-spaced pages in length and

should address the readings for that session, drawing attention to new themes that are introduced, old themes that are revisited, and any other questions or observations the student hopes for our discussion to address. While students may raise multiple issues in their papers, the best focus papers will have a clear overarching theme or argument.

A sign-up sheet will be provided early in the semester. Students may reschedule or trade slots at their own discretion without penalty up to 24 hours before the class session in question. If a student fails to complete a focus paper for which they have signed up, they may choose a different session (assuming slots remain) without penalty on the first occurrence. On the second occurrence, their substitute paper will be able to earn only half the available points. On the third and subsequent occurrences, they will be unable to make up the missed paper and presentation.

The **final paper** will count as 35% of the student's final grade. It may be on a topic of the student's choice, so long as it is related to the course materials, and may, but need not, include scholarly research. It must be 6-8 pages in length, double-spaced with standard fonts and margins, follow a recognized documentation style in the humanities—preferably Chicago or MLA—and have a clear argumentative thesis. Even if using only class materials, all papers must include a full bibliography. I very strongly recommend, but do not strictly require, that students consult with me before choosing a topic. Students may choose to submit ***an early draft*** by the deadline listed on the syllabus below.

***All written assignments must be turned in on Blackboard*** by the due date listed on the course schedule below; in case of technical difficulties with Blackboard, you may submit the paper via email or, in a true emergency, in print form for the sake of meeting the deadline, but the paper must be posted on Blackboard as soon as possible in order to receive comments and a grade. Outside of cases involving computer problems, students should ***not*** print their papers. Students submit ***all written work*** in Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx) format; in case of technical difficulties submitting in the required format, you may use another format for the sake of meeting the deadline, but must resubmit in the required in order to receive comments and a grade.

#### **Note on Institutional Policies**

Please note that the college-wide policy on plagiarism holds for this class and that student assignments may be run through plagiarism-detection software at the professor's discretion. Plagiarism is a very serious academic and ethical offence that can lead to failure of the assignment or course—or, after multiple instances, expulsion from college. Please consult the Student Handbook for more details of the plagiarism policy. All other institutional policies apply equally, including those related to accommodations for students with learning disabilities or differences and Title IX protections. More details on those policies are available in the Student Handbook, and students are encouraged to approach the professor with any questions or concerns they may have.

#### **Class Schedule and Readings**

*This calendar provides the schedule for assignments and readings for our time together this semester. Students should be aware that the schedule may change, particularly given that this is the first time the course is being offered in its current form. All students will be alerted as soon as possible via email and Blackboard announcement to any changes. **Failure to check email regularly is no excuse for missing these updates.** Note that Bible references*

are given in standard chapter-verse format; *Qur'an* references give the surah (or chapter) number and verses where applicable. In selections from *Life of Muhammad*, you should always start at the first heading and end before the last heading on the page unless otherwise noted.

Monday	January 6	Course introduction: Prayers from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions (handout)
Wednesday	January 8	<i>Life of Muhammad (LM)</i> , pp. 3-4, 68-87 (skim poetry sections); Bible: Exodus 1-2; 1 Samuel 1; Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2
Friday	January 10	<i>LM</i> , pp. 104-121, 130-131, 142-145, 155-159
Monday	January 13	Bible: Amos (whole book); Matthew 13 and 24-25; Luke 12; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; Revelation 18-22
Wednesday	January 15	Sells, <i>Approaching the Qur'an</i> , pp. 42-76 (35-39 recommended)
Friday	January 17	Sells, <i>Approaching the Qur'an</i> , pp. 78-103
Monday	January 20	<b>NO CLASS—Martin Luther King Day</b> Sells, <i>Approaching the Qur'an</i> , pp. 104-141 Sells, <i>Approaching the Qur'an</i> , “Hearing the Qur'an” (pp.161-196)—also download audio files and listen to at least one sura until you feel you can follow along
Wednesday	January 22	
Friday	January 24	
Monday	January 27	<i>Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries (AQC)</i> , ch. 6: Commentaries by Muqātil, Tabarī, Kāshānī, Burūsawī, and Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	January 29	Qur'an 67-75, 77-80; Bible: Genesis 6-8
Friday	January 31	Qur'an 45-46, 50-56
Monday	February 3	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 5: Commentaries by Hūd, Tabarī, Tabrisī, Sharafī, Alūsī, and Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	February 5	Bible: Exodus 3-15
Friday	February 7	Qur'an 40-44; Bible: Genesis 12:1-4
Monday	February 10	Qur'an 37-38; Bible: Genesis 19:1-29, and 22:1-19; 1 Samuel 11-12; Job 1-2 and 42
Wednesday	February 12	Qur'an 30-32, 34-36, 39
Friday	February 14	Qur'an 10-11, 13-15; Bible: Jonah (whole book), Genesis 18
Monday	February 17	Qur'an 12; Bible: Genesis 37, 39-47
Wednesday	February 19	Qur'an 16-18; <i>LM</i> , pg. 181 (starting at heading “The Night Journey and the Ascent into Heaven”)-187
Friday	February 21	Qur'an 19-21, 23; Bible: Luke 1-2 (review)
Monday	February 24	Qur'an 6-7; Bible: Exodus 24, 32-33

Wednesday	February 26	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 3: Commentaries by Tabarī, Rāzī, Kāshānī, Alūsī, Fadl Allāh
Friday	February 28	Qur'an 25-29; Bible: Numbers 16; 1 Kings 10:1-23
Monday	March 2	<b>NO CLASS—Spring Break</b>
Wednesday	March 4	<b>NO CLASS—Spring Break</b>
Friday	March 6	<b>NO CLASS—Spring Break</b>
Monday	March 9	<i>LM</i> , pp. 191-192, 221-233, 242-247, 281 (up to poetry section)
Wednesday	March 11	Qur'an 2:1-39; Genesis 2:4-3:24; Hallaj, "Iblis as Tragic Lover" (Blackboard)
Friday	March 13	Qur'an 2:40-141; Bible: Exodus 16; Numbers 20:1-13; Galatians 3; Romans 4
Monday	March 16	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 1: Commentaries from Hūd, Tabarī, Kāshānī, Burūsawī, Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	March 18	Qur'an 2:142-286
Friday	March 20	<b>NO CLASS—Professor attending conference</b>
Monday	March 23	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 2: Commentaries from Qummī, Ayyāshī, Tabarī, Kāshānī, Mawdūdī, Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	March 25	<i>LM</i> , pp. 289-314
Friday	March 27	Qur'an 8-9; <i>LM</i> , pp. 321-327
Monday	March 30	Qur'an 3; <i>LM</i> , pp. 370-391
Wednesday	April 1	Qur'an 22, 33; <i>LM</i> , pp. 450-460
Friday	April 3	Qur'an 5; Bible: Genesis 4:1-16; Numbers 13-14; Matthew 14:13-21; John 2:1-11 and 6
Monday	April 6	Qur'an 4, 49, 58, 65
Wednesday	April 8	Qur'an 24, 66; <i>LM</i> , pp. 792-794, 493-499
Friday	April 10	<b>NO CLASS—Good Friday</b>
Monday	April 13	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 4: Commentaries from Furāt, Tabarī, Ja'far b. Mansūr, Zamakhsharī, Kāshānī, Mawdūdī, Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	April 15	Qur'an 57, 59, 61-64, 76
Friday	April 17	<b>NO CLASS—Honors Day</b> <b>Draft of final paper due by noon (if rewriting)</b>
Monday	April 20	Qur'an 47-48, 60; <i>LM</i> , pp. 499-510
Wednesday	April 22	<i>LM</i> , pp. 540-556 (up to poetry part), 649-652, 678-689
Wednesday	April 29	<b>ALL WRITTEN WORK DUE BY NOON</b>