

SGBH 313: Reading the Qur'an
Spring 2023
MWF, 9:20-10:25, Goldspohn 22

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Office: In flux—confirm with professor
Office Hours: MWF 11:50-1:10 or by appointment (in person or Zoom)

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, a collection of traditional commentaries, and a contemporary feminist interpretation of 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

This course also meets the goals of the following Cardinal Directions general education requirements: Humanities, Ethical Dimensions, and Writing.

Course Readings

Barlas, Asma, *“Believing Women” in Islam* (U Texas Press). ISBN: 9780292709041
Hamza, Rizvi, and Mayer, eds., *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries, Volume I: The Nature of the Divine* (Oxford UP). ISBN: 978-0199600595
The Koran Interpreted: A Translation, trans. A.J. Arberry (Touchstone). ISBN: 9780684825076

Students should also gain access to a Bible of their choice; a recommended version is included on the bookstore page. Other readings, most notably the full text of *The Life of Muhammad*, will be provided via Blackboard.

Course Requirements

Each student's grade will be based on class participation (40%) and written work (60%).

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**.

Your participation grades will be posted on Blackboard roughly every two weeks. Normal day-to-day participation for each class session is worth approximately 1% of your final grade. In addition, students will be required to have a **one-on-one meeting** with the professor around the middle of the semester. The purpose of this conference will be an open-ended discussion of the student's performance and any ways that their experience in class can be improved. Failure to schedule and attend this meeting by the deadline specified below will result in a penalty to class participation points.

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. 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 write a paper summarizing and reflecting on the day's reading (at least one *full* page, double spaced) or schedule a meeting of at least 10 minutes to discuss the reading with the professor. Absence make-ups must be completed **within two weeks** of the absence being made up, though I strongly urge you to do so earlier.

Students requiring *additional accommodations* are urged to discuss this matter with the professor as early as possible in the semester and to devise a formal written plan in consultation with the relevant institutional offices. In line with the Shimer School's policies on attendance, accommodations will be made with the aim of allowing a student to attend at least 80% of class sessions synchronously and without placing undue burdens on either the accommodated student or the faculty member.

Written work will take the form of two short essays and a longer research paper, along with process points for the research paper. The descriptions here are only preliminary—more detail will be provided closer to the due dates.

The two **short essays** may be written in the order of the students' choice—either one may be turned in on either of the essay deadlines listed on the syllabus.

- One essay will compare a Qur'anic passage or story to a biblical parallel. Students wishing to explore parallels beyond those offered on the syllabus are required to get approval from the professor first. Papers should not only take account of the primary differences between the texts—they should focus on the difference those differences make. What do the choices of the biblical and Qur'anic authors tell us about their priorities and goals?
- The other essay will explore a Qur'anic passage in light of either the *Life of Muhammad*, the traditional commentaries, or Barlas's analysis. What does the supplemental source tell us about the Qur'anic text? What, if anything, does it leave out?

Both short essays must be 3-4 *full* double-spaced pages and must include ample quotation from all cited texts throughout. Each is worth 10% of your final grade, or 20% altogether. No outside scholarly research is required for these papers.

The **research paper** provides an opportunity to explore a topic related to the Qur'an in greater depth, in dialogue with scholarly research. The paper itself will be worth 25% of your grade, while a series of process check-ins will be worth 15%, bringing the entire assignment to 40% of your grade.

Process steps include the following (each worth 5%):

- A *one-page proposal* for a paper topic, including a list of key passages from the course materials that you intend to analyze. This proposal will be presented orally in class on the day it is due.
- An *annotated bibliography* consisting of at least five potential sources. All sources must be peer reviewed scholarly works (journal articles or books), found through the Oesterle Library databases and catalogue—not Google. On the day this is due, students should be prepared to provide a brief oral summary of the source they believe to be most useful or interesting, explaining its value for their project.
- A *full draft* of the paper, due prior to the end of the semester. The professor will provide detailed comments to guide students' final revision of their papers. The sheer act of submitting a paper of close to the required length will be worth 5% of your final grade. Significant shortcomings in length will result in proportionate loss of points; lateness, barring a serious emergency, will cost 1% per day until no points are available. Note that 5% of your grade is the equivalent of half a letter grade.

The final paper must have a clear argumentative thesis, cite at least three peer-reviewed scholarly sources found through the library database or catalogue, and be 8-10 pages in length. Students may use either MLA or Chicago documentation style.

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.

Grading Criteria for Essays

A: The paper demonstrates excellent competence in all areas: imaginative choice of material; excellent thesis clearly stated and supported with persuasive evidence and reasoning; well-organized ideas that unify the paper; good transitions between ideas and between paragraphs; clear and logical development of discussion; the paper is virtually free of errors in usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

B: The paper demonstrates above-average competence in all areas: appropriate choice of material; good thesis clearly stated and supported with good evidence and reasons; overall unity but some disjointed paragraphs and vague transitions; ideas sometimes out of sequence, and discussion occasionally hard to follow; clear and readable language that may at times be too general, vague, or inappropriate. It is comparatively free of errors in the use of English.

C: The paper demonstrates average competence in all areas: predictable, overly general, trite or obvious thesis supported with some irrelevant material; basic organization showing that the paper follows a logical plan; some paragraphs may be disunified or misplaced, containing abrupt shifts in ideas; wander off topic at times, becoming difficult to follow; sentences sometimes awkwardly constructed with wordy, imprecise, or trite language; mechanical errors that are distracting.

D: The paper demonstrates below-average competence in all areas: vague or carelessly thought-out thesis supported with inappropriate material; lack of overall unity, poor organization and development of ideas with some illogical transitions and weak conclusions; confusing sentences or passages whose meaning is unclear; poorly chosen language with numerous mechanical errors.

F: The F paper usually indicates failure to state and develop a main idea. It may also contain serious errors in logic, grammar, spelling, punctuation, documentation, and sentence structure.

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. Note that the professor considers the use of AI text-generation software as a form of plagiarism. 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. 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 (abbreviated as LM), you should always start at the first heading and end before the last heading on the page unless otherwise noted.*

Monday	January 9	Course introduction: Prayers from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions (handout)
Wednesday	January 11	<i>Life of Muhammad (LM)</i> , pp. 3-4, 68-87 (skim poetry sections); Bible: Exodus 1-2; 1 Samuel 1 and 16:1-13; Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2
Friday	January 13	<i>LM</i> , pp. 104-121, 130-131, 142-145, 155-159
Monday	January 16	Martin Luther King Day—NO CLASS Bible: Amos (whole book); Matthew 13 and 24-25; Luke 12; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; Revelation 18-22 Qur'an 81-114
Wednesday	January 18	
Friday	January 20	
Monday	January 23	<i>Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries (AQC)</i> , ch. 6: Commentaries by Muqātil, Tabarī, Kāshānī, Burūsawī, and Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	January 25	Qur'an 67-75, 77-80; Bible: Genesis 6-8
Friday	January 27	
Monday	January 30	<i>AQC</i> , ch. 5: Commentaries by Hūd, Tabarī, Tabrisī, Sharafī, Alūsī, and Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	February 1	Barlas, <i>Believing Women</i> , preface, ch. 1 Bible: Exodus 3-15
Friday	February 3	
Monday	February 6	Qur'an 40-44; Bible: Genesis 12:1-4
Wednesday	February 8	
Friday	February 10	Qur'an 37-38; Bible: Genesis 19:1-29, and 22:1-19; 1 Samuel 11-12; Job 1-2 and 42 Barlas, <i>Believing Women</i> , ch. 4
Monday	February 13	Short Essay #1 due by class time—NO CLASS Qur'an 30-32, 34-36, 39 Qur'an 12; Bible: Genesis 37, 39-47
Wednesday	February 15	
Friday	February 17	
Monday	February 20	Qur'an 10-11, 14-15; Bible: Jonah (all), Genesis 18 Qur'an 16-18; <i>LM</i> , pg. 181 (starting at heading "The Night Journey and the Ascent into Heaven")-187
Wednesday	February 22	
Friday	February 24	Qur'an 19; "Protoevangelium of James" (**)
Monday	February 27	Qur'an 20-21, 23, 25-29; Bible: Numbers 16; 1 Kings 10:1-23 Qur'an 6-7; Bible: Exodus 24, 32-34 <i>AQC</i> , ch. 3: Commentaries by Tabarī, Rāzī, Kāshānī, Alūsī, Fadl Allāh
Wednesday	March 1	
Friday	March 3	

Monday	March 6	<i>LM</i> , pp. 191-192, 221-233, 242-247, 281 (up to poetry section) Qur'an 2:1-39; Genesis 2:4-3:24; Hallaj, "Iblis as Tragic Lover" (Blackboard)
Wednesday	March 8	
Friday	March 10	Qur'an 2:40-141; Bible: Exodus 16; Numbers 20:1-13; Galatians 3; Romans 4 Deadline for individual conference
Monday	March 13	Short Essay #2 due by 5pm Spring Break—NO CLASS Spring Break—NO CLASS Spring Break—NO CLASS
Wednesday	March 15	
Friday	March 17	
Monday	March 20	Paper Topic Due on Blackboard and for in-class presentation Bible: Exodus 20, Leviticus 17-26, Deuteronomy 5 Qur'an 2:142-286; 1 Samuel 8-10, Judges 7 Qur'an 8-9; <i>LM</i> , pp. 289-314, 321-327
Wednesday	March 22	
Friday	March 24	
Monday	March 27	Qur'an 3; <i>LM</i> , pp. 370-391 Qur'an 22, 33; <i>LM</i> , pp. 450-460 Qur'an 5; Bible: Genesis 4:1-16; Numbers 13-14; Matthew 14:13-21; John 2:1-11 and 6
Wednesday	March 29	
Friday	March 31	
Monday	April 3	Qur'an 24, 66; <i>LM</i> , pp. 792-794, 493-499 Annotated Bibliography Due on Blackboard and for in-class presentation <i>AQC</i> , ch. 4: Commentaries from Furāt, Tabarī, Ja'far b. Mansūr, Zamakhsharī, Kāshānī, Mawdudī, Fadl Allāh Good Friday—NO CLASS
Wednesday	April 5	
Friday	April 7	
Monday	April 10	Qur'an 4, 49, 58, 65 Barlas, <i>Believing Women</i> , ch. 5, postscript Qur'an 13, 57, 59, 61-64, 76
Wednesday	April 12	
Friday	April 14	
Monday	April 17	Professor traveling—NO CLASS Full draft of research paper due by 5pm Qur'an 47-48, 60; <i>LM</i> , pp. 499-510 <i>LM</i> , pp. 540-556 (up to poetry part), 649-652, 678-689
Wednesday	April 19	
Friday	April 21	
Monday	April 24	Barlas, <i>Believing Women</i> , ch. 2 Barlas, <i>Believing Women</i> , ch. 3 <i>Forty Hadith of An-Nawawi</i> (**)
Wednesday	April 26	
Friday	April 28	
Wednesday	May 3	Final draft of research paper due by 5pm