

Views of Islam in the U.S. and Islam Itself

ISL 372 (41080), AMS 327 (31135), RS 346 (42955)

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- American university courses on American views of Islam vis-à-vis Islam itself would have made sense at almost any time since the late 1940s. But such a course seems particularly relevant today in the light of American presidential campaign rhetoric in 2015 and 2016 (e.g., “Islam hates us”) and negative characterizations of Islam by officials in the American administration that took office in early 2017 (e.g., “Islam is a cancer [which] the American Founding Fathers wanted nothing to do with”) and that administration’s pursuit of a ban on the entry to the U.S. of citizens of so-called Muslim countries. Such statements and actions have helped intensify and crystallize specific, longstanding, and categorical negative perceptions about Islam on the part of many Americans.

- This course on American perceptions of Islam vis-à-vis Islam itself first reviews upwards of twenty-five common and documented American perceptions of Islam, among them: (1) Islam does not allow for freedom of interpretation of its Koran—because the Koran presents God’s exact Arabic words to humankind, no room for debate or variegated interpretations exist for its readers; (2) Islam is a sort of monolith without the varieties in beliefs and practices that characterize Christianity around the world; (3) The Koran preaches intolerance toward believers of other religious faiths; (4) Islam (has) expanded as a religion primarily through military force, with the Koran mandating war and violence to further the spread of Islam and preaching jihad or holy war as a Muslim duty; (5) The Koran posits a clearly stated materialistic reward in the afterlife, with riches, comfort, food and drink, and companionship for males, which rewards provide a vision and incentive for Muslim men to carry out acts of violence on earth with disregard for their own lives; (6) The Muslim prophet Muhammad was a sensualist, an opportunist, a ruthless warrior, and a calculating politician; (7) Muslim peoples do not know how to separate church and state or to institute democratic forms of government; (8) Islam posits an inferior position for women vis-à-vis men, a view that Koran chapter on women states categorically; (9) Islam calls on Muslims not only to do good and avoid evil, but to see to it that others do good and avoid evil—more specifically, Islam calls for the implementation of *Shari’a* religious law throughout the world.

- The class then examines American writing voicing these perceptions (in files in the course’s Dropbox folder) and assesses those perceptions in the context of four course texts:

- (1) The Koran;
- (2) *No god but God: Updated Edition* (2011) by Reza Aslan;
- (3) commentary and essays by Muslim scholars and critics addressing relevant issues (available in the course Dropbox folder); and
- (4) a series of PowerPoint presentations on “American Perceptions of Islam,” and “Islam, Pillars of Islam, the Koran, and Islamic Architecture,” “Islam as Defined by Iranian Art,” “Rumi, Sufism, and Islam,” and “Iranian Culture” (available at www.Issuu.com and distributed to e-mail addresses vis We Transfer). Course notes and exercises, including handouts, also appear as files in the course Dropbox folder.

• As for the Koran, parts of which are assigned reading through the course, students can choose whatever “authorized” online or hard copy translation they prefer. *Wikipedia* lists 70+ translations published since 1900, while a Google search for online translations yields a score of versions. Here are five translations that the course instructor uses:

- *The Koran*. Translated by N.J. Dawood. Penguin Classics, 2006.
- *The Qur'an*. Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. Oxford's World Classics, 2016.
- *The Qur'an*. Translated by Tarif Khalidi. Penguin Classics, 2008.
- *The Study Quran*. Edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. HarperOne, 2015. lix, 1988p.
- www.quod.lib.umich.edu/k/koran/browse.html

Class discussion of Koran chapters and passages involves consideration of translation differences as a means of further appreciation of the complexity of meaning and richness of expression in the original Arabic. Such discussion, along with listening to online recorded recitations of Koran passages and chapters, also serves a further purpose, that being to counterbalance the common reaction of readers of the Koran in English that the book seems unappealing in literary terms, whereas it strikes many readers of the original Arabic as extraordinarily appealing.

• At the same time, after a demonstration that multiple Islams exist rather than a single Islam, the course focuses attention on one discrete Islam, the 12er Shi'ite Islam of Iran, the major Muslim society that arguably receives the strongest stereotypical and negative criticism in America. In addition to academic data on the theology and history of Twelver Shi'ite Islam and its role as the Iranian state religion since the beginning of the 16th century and on Islam in Iran today, both as the metaphorical flag and sword of the dictatorial and oppressive theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran and as a core element in the culture of the vast majority of Iranians, the course also treats anecdotal evidence offered by the instructor, who lived and worked in Iran for over six years, two of them as a teacher in the city of Mashhad, Iran's second largest city and chief religious center and pilgrimage destination, and whose social life in Austin involves regular interaction with Muslim Iranian Americans.

• The course concludes with consideration both of factors and reasons behind misperceptions about Islam on the part of many Americans and of those ideas and practices and features of various Islams that Muslim scholars and critics themselves argue need reforming or changing or abandoning.

• The bases for course grades are: class participation and oral reports on assigned readings, i.e., sections of course texts (25% of the course grade); two review tests (25% each)—the course has no final examination—; and a 10-page term paper addressing a specific American perception of Islam (25%). The course grading scale is: A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D + (67-69), D (63-66), D- (60-62), and F (0-59).

• Students who miss a class, an assigned recitation or oral report, or a review test in order to observe a religious holy day will have the opportunity to complete the missed work. Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone) or <http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd>.

Views of Islam in the U.S. and Islam Itself Course Schedule and Assignments

1	T Jan 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Perceptions of Islam–PowerPoint 1. • Course Goals and Activities. 	
2	Th Jan 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s <i>The Study Quran</i> (2015) and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem’s <i>The Qur’an</i> (2016). • “Prologue,” <i>No god but God</i> (2011) by Reza Aslan. 	• K1:1-7
3	T Jan 29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam from Abraham to Mohammad. 	• K12:1-111
4	Th Jan 31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 1: Pre-Islamic Arabia. 	• K105–K114
5	T Feb 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 2: Muhammad in Mecca. • PowerPoint Images of Muhammad and Early Islam • Comparison of Self-contained Passages from Early Meccan Koran Chapters 	• K
6	Th Feb 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 3: First Muslims. 	• K
7	T Feb 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 4: The Meaning of Jihad. 	• K
8	Th Feb 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 5: The Successors to Muhammad. • PowerPoint Images of Early Islamic Art and the Koran 	• K
9	T Feb 19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 6: The Development of Islamic Theology and Law. 	• K
10	Th Feb 21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam to the Mongols, 610-1258. • PowerPoint Presentation on Islamic Architecture, 700-1258. 	• K
11	T Feb 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 8: The Sufi Way. 	• K
12	Th Feb 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumi (1207-1273)–Biographical Sketch. 	• K
13	T Mar 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rumi–Poems. 	• K
14	Th Mar 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Test #1. 	
15	T Mar 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Review Test #1. • Islam from the Mongols (1220s-1258) to 2018. 	• K • K
16	Th Mar 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hâfez (c.1320-c.1390) and Islam in His Poems 	• K
17	T Mar 26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam in the Persianate World, 630s-1501. 	• K
18	Th Mar 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Iranian Safavids (1501-1722) and 12er Shi’ite Islam. 	• K
19	T Apr 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PowerPoint Presentation on Safavid Religious Architecture. 	• K
20	Th Apr 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 7: From Shi’ism to Khomeinism. 	• K
21	T Apr 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from <i>Weststruckness</i> (1962) and <i>Lost in the Crowd</i> (1966) by Jalāl Ā-e Ahmad (1923-69) 	• K
22	Th Apr 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 9: The Response to Colonialism. 	• K
23	T Apr 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam or Islams? 	• K
24	Th Apr 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • America’s Most Disliked Muslim Society. 	• K2:1-286
25	T Apr 23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 10: The Quest for Islamic Democracy. 	• K4:1-176 • K2
26	Th Apr 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video Reports on Shi’ite Pilgrimages to Karbalā and Mashhad. 	
27	T Apr 30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Perceptions of Islam-Powerpoint 2. 	
28	Th May 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review Test #2. 	
29	T May 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aslan 11: The Future of Islam. • American Perceptions of Islam-PowerPoint 3. • Historical and Cultural Factors in American Perceptions of Islam. 	
30	Th May 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islams Today and Tomorrow. 	