

Rise of Islam: 500-1200 CE

Spring 2026 Syllabus Version 6.0

Course Information

Logistics

- **Instructor:** Dr. James Pickett
- **Course:** HIST 0753
- **Schedule:** Tues / Thurs 2:30-3:45pm
- **Classroom:** 233 Lawrence Hall
- **Email:** pickettj@pitt.edu
- **Office:** 3908 Posvar (in annex to the right of dept.)
- **Office Hours:** Mondays 2-3:30pm (3908 Posvar with Zoom available upon request: Zoom Link, 696-530-3747)
- **Course Policies** (*considered part of the syllabus*): <https://courses.bactriana.org/policies/>

Content Overview

Course Objective This course seeks to impart an understanding of the Islamic tradition by exploring the religion's formative period. The first centuries of Islam are fascinating for many of the same reasons they are complex and even controversial: our primary sources are fragmented, partisan, and often retrospective; a tremendous range of voices competed to define the new religion; and nearly all subsequent Muslim thinkers would harken back to this period to legitimize their own positions. In other words, the history of the formation of Islam remains dynamic, charged, and relevant to the present day. We will endeavor to develop an understanding of the diversity of voices in this early period and consider why certain conceptualizations of theology, law, and philosophy displaced others; and then follow those voices beyond the Arabian origins of the new religion to examine its manifestation in the North African and Central / South Asian borderlands.

Organization of Course Content The course integrates two intertwined themes: (1) early Islamic empires as geopolitical formations; and (2) the development of ideas within the religious tradition. We will begin by spending significant time on the pre-Islamic period, examining both imperial and theological continuities between late antiquity and Islam. Then we will follow one of the fastest expanding empires in world history as the early Islamic polity advanced of the Arabian Peninsula. Simultaneously, we will consider the development of Islamic scripture (Qur'an and Hadith), early theological disputes, scientific advancement, and the consolidation of a legal tradition. The course concludes on the eve of the Mongol conquests, as the vague outlines of something resembling a cultural-religious consensus become discernable.

Learning Outcomes The principle learning outcomes of this course are twofold:

1. Ability to deploy original analysis through the engagement of primary sources
2. The articulation of that analysis through evidence-based writing

Both of these skills are developed in view of applying them beyond the academic field of history.

Course Requirements

Required Texts and Readings **Primary Textbook:** Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World To 1750: The Making of a Civilization* (Routledge, 2017), available for free as an e-book on PittCat.

Alternative: Used copies of Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405: The Making of a Civilization* (Routledge, 2003), can be found inexpensively online. (The chapter titles are the same in both versions, though page numbers differ somewhat.)

All other readings are available digitally in the shared folder.

Useful Reference Works

- Encyclopaedia of Islam: The mainstay reference for all things Islam.
- Encyclopædia Iranica: Similar idea, Iran-specific, available free online.
- William Brice (updated by Hugh Kennedy), *An Historical Atlas of Islam* (Brill, 2001).
- *New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge 2010).
- Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).
- Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, trans. Ali Quli Qarai (Yale University Press, 2018).
- King's College London podcast series "History of Philosophy without any gaps" with Peter Adamson, Section on Islamic Philosophy: <http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/islamic-world>.

Workload Expectations

- **Weekly Reading:** 40-60 pages per week (complete before associated class)
- **Time Outside Class:** 4-6 hours per week
- **Platforms:** Canvas and TopHat (required)

It is the student's responsibility to have all of these platforms up and running within the first week of class. It is also the student's responsibility to log into TopHat (which is used for in-class exercises) before the start of class. For technical support, consult <https://teaching.pitt.edu/educational-software-consulting/>.

Assignments & Grading

Study Guides (15% of final grade)

What they are:

- One assignment per unit posted weekly on TopHat
- Designed to help guide you through difficult material, integrating lectures and assigned readings
- Due on TopHat one hour after the associated class session

How to complete them:

- Complete responses relating to assigned readings before attending class
- Complete remaining questions during class based on lecture information
- Be ready to submit at the end of class
- If you are unsure about a question, raise your hand and ask – everyone will benefit

Grading:

- 80% or higher completion → full credit (bumped up to 100%)
- Below 80% → raw score
- Questions or concerns about your grade should be discussed during office hours only

In-Class Participation (20% of final grade)

What it includes:

- TopHat real-time quizzes and reinforcement exercises completed during class
- Interactive simulation
- Credit given for participation (even if you get questions wrong)

Important rules:

- Completing in-class TopHat exercises without being present is considered cheating

Grading:

- 80% or higher completion → full credit (bumped up to 100%)

- Below 80% → raw score
- Questions or concerns about your grade should be discussed during office hours only

Midterm Essay (35% of final grade)

Format & Requirements:

- Approximately 700 words (3 pages)
- In-class, handwritten essay
- Prompts provided a week in advance
- You may consult any hard-copy references (e.g., printed notes – up to ten pages). Notes must be handed in along with the essay.
- Bonus points from the *optional* Analytical Writing Skills Sequence will be applied to this category.

Revision Option:

- You may revise your handwritten draft into a typed, electronically submitted revision by the specified date
- The second grade will fully replace the first one

Final Paper (30% of final grade)

Format & Requirements:

- 1300 words (around 5-6 pages)
- Handwritten during the designated finals time in the designated finals room
- Based on assigned readings (no additional research required)
- Prompts provided a week in advance
- You may consult any hard-copy references (e.g., printed notes – up to ten pages)
- You are welcome to discuss your draft during office hours before the exam

Extra Credit Opportunities

Numerous opportunities available throughout the semester (counted in Participation category). Generally involves attending a university lecture and writing a short reflection (no more than one page) relating the content to course themes. Suggest extra credit assignments at least three days in advance so colleagues can also attend.

Grading Scale & Policies

Letter Grade Distribution: Standard Canvas cutoffs apply, with one exception: only the two highest overall grades receive an “A+”; other grades in the standard A+ range are collapsed into “A.”

Absences and Makeup Work: Course policies build in substantial flexibility. If you miss an assignment or class, existing systems accommodate you without separate communication needed. For extreme circumstances requiring additional accommodations beyond these policies, a note from your advisor is required.

Online Grading: All grading administered through Canvas, where you can check your status in real time. TopHat tracks point totals, but only Canvas grades count officially.

Artificial Intelligence: This course follows a “broad use” AI policy: you’re encouraged to use LLMs for tasks like formatting, grammar checking, brainstorming, and summarizing readings. You must cite AI-generated material when it fundamentally shapes your conceptual understanding or creative output—but routine assistance with writing mechanics doesn’t require acknowledgment. (Note that the midterm and final essays are handwritten in class, so AI assistance is naturally limited for major assignments.)

Communication: Promptly responding to emails sent to your official Pitt account is a course requirement.

Content Advisory

Sections of this course will variously deal with subjects such as violence, enslavement, and misogyny. Some primary source readings were written by historical actors harboring intense prejudices of various kinds; discussions will tackle some of these issues head-on.

Course Schedule

Part One: Thinking about Islam, Thinking about Islamic History

Core Questions

What is “Islam”? Is it a religion? A culture? A civilization? Something else entirely? And what do those terms even mean, anyway? How can we approach the study of so vast a phenomenon?

Session 1 (Jan. 13): Course Overview Agenda:

- Mini-Lecture: “Core Concepts in Islamic History”
- Policies and Expectations
- Digital Platforms (Canvas, TopHat, Zoom)
- Introductions

Session 2 (Jan. 15): What is Islam? Agenda:

- Group Discussion: What is culture / religion / civilization / empire?
- Mini-Lecture: “Elephants in the Room: Apologetics, Islamophobia, and Unlearning What We Think We Know”

Assignments:

- Marshall G. S. Hodgson, “The Role of Islam in World History,” in *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke, III, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993, 97–125.
- Robert Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, October 11, 2012, 1053–77.

Part Two: The World of Late Antiquity

Core Questions

No religion or culture comes out of nowhere fully formed – so what did the Middle East look like before Islam? What did the religious landscape look like in the Byzantine (Roman) and Persian empires? Which imperial traditions were already available for early Islamic empires to draw upon? How do we understand Christianity and Judaism during this time period, and what was Zoroastrianism?

Session 3 (Jan. 20): Religions of Late Antiquity – Christianity and Judaism Agenda:

- Mini-Lecture: “What is ‘Late Antiquity’?”
- Lecture: “Christianity and Judaism in the Late Roman World”

Assignments:

- Christine Hayes, “Law in Classical Rabbinic Judaism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Judaism and Law* (2017): pp. 76-95 only.
- Bart Ehrman, “The Gospels as Historical Sources” in *Did Jesus Exist?* (HarperOne, 2012) (11 pages).

Session 4 (Jan. 22): Religions of the Silk Road Agenda:

- Lecture: “Persian Culture and the Silk Road”

Assignments (read at least two out of three):

- Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, ed., *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia*, (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 63-74.
- Maria Macuch, “Disseminating the Mazdayasnian Religion. An Edition of the Avesten Hērbedestān,” in *Festschrift in Honour of Nicholas Sims-Williams* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009), 171–90.
- Prods O. Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 160-167.

Session 5 (Jan. 27): Geopolitics in Seventh-Century Arabia Agenda:

- Mini-Lecture: “Traces of Paganism in the Arabian Peninsula”
- Lecture: “Byzantines vs. Sasanians: Imperial Collapse”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 1, section entitled “Southwestern Asia in the Seventh Century” (15 pages).
- Excerpt from Theophanes the Confessor’s *Chronographia* on Byzantine-Persian wars (14 pages).
- Excerpts of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry (6 pages – quick read-through).
- “Petra and Palmyra” excerpt in Ladan Akbarnia, Venetia Porter, and Fahmida Suleman, *The Islamic World: A History in Objects* (London: The British Museum, 2018) (2 pages, images).

Part Three: Mecca, Medina, and the First Islamic Community

Core Questions

Why did an Islamic polity arise in the middle of the Arabian desert – and why in the seventh century? How did it manage to expand so rapidly, and defeat such powerful empires? What is the Qur'an? The Hadith?

Session 6 (Jan. 29): The Last Prophet Agenda:

- Lecture: “Muhammad and the Early Muslim Community”
- Mini-Lecture: “What do we think we know about the earliest Muslims – and how can we know it?”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 1, section entitled “The Rise of Islam” through chapter conclusion (11 pages).
- Tabari on the Satanic Verses (5 pages).
- The Armenian Chronicle of 661 attributed to Sebeos (640s CE) in *A Prophet Has Appeared : The Rise of Islam Through Christian and Jewish Eyes, a Sourcebook* (ed. Stephen Shoemaker) (11 pages).

Session 7 (Feb. 3): Outlines of a New Community Agenda:

- Lecture: “Scripture and the Nature of the Quran”

Assignment:

- Egger: Chapter 3, “The Development of Sectarianism” (beginning through “Karbala” section, stop before “The Abbasid Revolution” section; 10 pages; note these sections are assigned out of order).
- Excerpts on the community at Medina (10 pages).

Session 8 (Feb. 5): Syncretism Agenda:

- Guest Mini-Lecture by Rachel Schine: “Race in Pre/Early Islam”
- Review Workshop

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 3, “Shi'ite Identities” section through end (12 pages).
- Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), ch. 1 pp. 1-20. (Note: entire first chapter available in the shared folder, but you only need to read the first twenty pages).

- Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, Christianity sections 1.10, 1.11 (8 pages).
- Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam*, Shi'ism sections 3.13, 3.17 (6 pages).

Part Four: The First Islamic Empire and the Emergence of a World Religion

Core Questions

What sort of empire was the Umayyad Caliphate? The Abbasid Caliphate? To what extent did they draw on Byzantine (Roman) and Sasanian (Iranian) imperial traditions, respectively? At what point can we talk about a recognizable “Islamic” community? Where were the points of doctrinal agreement? What did people disagree about?

Session 9 (Feb. 10): House of Islam, from Spain to India Agenda:

- Lecture: “Civil War into an Islamic Empire”
- Lecture: “Early Doctrinal Disputes”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 2, “Arab Imperialism” (entire chapter – 28 pages).
- Sources on Umayyad Period (Tabari, Syriac sources, coins, architecture – 13 pages).
- Practicalities and Motivations of Conversion as Seen through Early Hadīth and Law (trans. Yohanan Friedmann) in *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age* (3 pages).

Session 10 (Feb. 12): Edge of the Islamic World Agenda:

- Lecture: “Resistance and Rebellion in a World Empire – North Africa and Central Asia”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 3, “The Development of Sectarianism” (“The Abbasid Revolution” section only; 3 pages).
- Excerpts on the Breakdown of Umayyad Authority (5 pages).
- Extracts from the Umayyad Period (4 pages).

Session 11 (Feb. 17): Islamic Coins as Historical Sources Agenda:

- Hands-on coins workshop

Assignments:

- Clive Foss, *Arab-Byzantine Coins: An Introduction, with a Catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2008), pp. vii-viv, 18-37. (Note that additional chapters are included in the same PDF in the shared folder in case of interest, but you are only required to read the aforementioned pages).

Part Five: The Abbasid Revolution and the “Golden Age” of Islam

Core Questions

What did Islamic theology, law, scriptural exegesis, science, philosophy, and mysticism look like during the formative period? Why is the Abbasid Caliphate remembered as the high point of Islamic civilization? Was it significant that the capital moved from Damascus to Baghdad? Who were the non-Muslims, and how did they relate to the new cultural-imperial system?

Session 12 (Feb. 19): Persian Empire Restored? Agenda:

- Lecture: “Black Banners in the East: The Abbasid Revolution”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 4, “The Center Cannot Hold: Three Caliphates” (beginning through “The Assertion of Regional Autonomy” section, stop before “The Fatimid Caliphate”; 8 pages).
- Excerpts on the Abbasid Revolution (13 pages).
- Writing Skills Sequence 3 (optional)

Session 13 (Feb. 24): Abbasid Culture and Society Agenda:

- Lecture: “The ‘Golden Age’ of Islam”

Assignments:

- Amira K. Bennison, “Princes and Beggars: Life and Society in the ’Abbasid Age,” in *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ’Abbasid Empire*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2009, 94-136.
- Yakut on Baghdad, the Round City (5 pages).
- Amanda Hannoosh Steinberg, “Reclaiming Women of Arabic Popular Epics” <https://arablit.org/2018/08/02/reclaiming-the-women-of-arabic-popular-epics/> or Arafat A. Razzaque, “Who ‘Wrote’ Aladdin? The Forgotten Syrian Storyteller,” *Ajam Media Collective*, September 14, 2017, <https://ajammc.com/2017/09/14/who-wrote-aladdin/>.

February 26: In-Class Midterm Essay Agenda:

- In-Class Midterm Essay

Session 14 (March 3): Aristotle in Arabic Agenda:

- Lecture: “One Religion, Many Interpretations”
- Lecture: “The Great Translation Project of Baghdad”
- In-Class Exercise: Understanding Quranic Interpretation (“Exegesis” / tafsir) and Hadith

Assignments:

- John Renard, “Interpreting the Sacred Sources” in *Islamic Theological Themes: A Primary Source Reader* (2014): pp. 27-47.
- Amira K. Bennison, “Baghdad’s ‘Golden Age’” in *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ’Abbasid Empire*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2009, 158-161, 175-194. (Note: the entire chapter is included on in the shared folder, but only the aforementioned pages are required).
- Autobiography of Ibn Sina (8 pages).
- Excerpt on Astronomical Instruments from Ladan Akbarnia, Venetia Porter, and Fahmida Suleman, *The Islamic World: A History in Objects* (London: Thames & Hudson : The British Museum, 2018) (2 pages, images).

Session 15 (March 17): Multiconfessional Empire Agenda:

- Lecture: “Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Islamdom”
- Group Discussion of Primary Sources

Assignments:

- Experiences of Non-Muslims under Muslim Rule (12 pages).
- Excerpt from *Gizistag Abalish* in Prods O. Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 243-247.
- “Disputation of John and the Emir” in Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, pp. 200-208.
- Excerpt on Jerusalem from Akbarnia et al., *The Islamic World: A History in Objects* (2 pages, images).

Session 16 (March 19): The Search for Truth Agenda:

- Lecture: “Philosophy, Theology, and the Mu’tazilite Inquisition”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 5, “Synthesis and Creativity” (“The Reception of Science and Philosophy” section through end; 10 pages; note that this section is assigned out of order).
- Ash’ari Critique of Mu’tazilites (7 pages).

Session 17 (March 24): Competing Caliphates, Struggling Sultanates Agenda:

- Lecture: “Slaves on Horses”
- Lecture: “The Caliphate of Cordoba”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 4, “The Center Cannot Hold: Three Caliphates” (“The Fatimid Caliphate” section through end; 18 pages).
- Sources on Umayyad Spain (11 pages).
- Competing Views of the Imamate (13 pages).

Session 18 (March 26): Sunnisms and Shi’isms Agenda:

- Lecture: “The Many Flavors of Shi’ism”
- Lecture: “The Seljuk-Fatimid Cold War”

Assignments:

- “Crystallization” and “Shi’ism as a Revolutionary Movement” (selections from Chapters 11 & 12) in Knysh, *Islam in Historical Perspective* (2016).
- F.E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) – sections 3.17-3.19 (10 pages).

Session 19 (March 31): Religion as Law Agenda:

- Lecture: “Foundation of the Islamic Legal Tradition”
- Review Workshop

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 5, “Synthesis and Creativity” (beginning through “The Impact of the Shari’a” section, stop before “Early Sufism” section; 8 pages).
- Table of Contents from Imam Malik ibn ’Anas, *The First Formulation of Islamic Law*.
- Shafi’i on Sources of the Law (7 pages).
- F.E. Peters, *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) – Sections 5.11, 5.12, 5.15, 5.17, 5.21, 5.22, 5.23 (15 pages).

Part Six: Twilight of the Caliphate

Core Questions

Why did the Abbasid Caliphs so quickly become puppets of other dynasties? Where did these Turkic dynasties come from, and what gave them such staying power? How do we understand the emergent Persian cultural influence during this period? And what is Islamic mysticism (Sufism)?

Session 20 (April 2): Of Climate Change and Nomads Agenda:

- Review: Islamic Law
- Lecture: “Mini-Ice Age, Agricultural Collapse, and Turkic Migration”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 6, “Filling the Vacuum of Power” (“The Advent of the Turks” section through “The Saljuq Invasion,” stop before “The Fatimid Empire”; 9 pages).

- “The Big Chill” in Richard Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 69-95.
- Al-Nishapuri on the Rise of the Seljuks (12 pages).

Session 21 (April 7): Subcontinental Frontier Agenda:

- Lecture: “Material and Cultural Exchange from al-Hind”
- In-Class Simulation: Alternate Histories, Paths Not Taken

Assignments:

- Al-Jahiz on the “Merits of the Turks” (3 pages).
- Nizam al-Mulk Treatise on Governing (2 pages).
- More Nizam al-Mulk, and excerpts on madrasa culture (from Halm – 4 pages).
- al-Beruni on the Indians (5 pages).

Session 22 (April 9): Holy War Agenda:

- Lecture: “The Crusades, through Muslim Eyes”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 6, “Filling the Vacuum of Power” (“The Fatimid Empire” section through chapter end; 15 pages).
- Egger: Chapter 7, “Barbarians at the Gates” (beginning through “The Disintegration of the Almohads and of Andalus” section, stop before “Realignment in the East” section; 16 pages).
- Usama ibn Munqidh in P.K. Hitti (trans.), *An Arab-Syrian gentleman and warrior in the period of the Crusades*, Princeton 1987, pp. 161-70.
- Excerpt on Crusades from Akbarnia et al., *The Islamic World: A History in Objects* (2 pages, images).

Session 23 (April 14): The Many Faces of Islamic Mysticism Agenda:

- In-Class Exercise: What is Sufism?
- Lecture: “Ascetics / Poets / Philosophers / Holy Fools”

Assignments:

- Egger: Chapter 5, “Synthesis and Creativity” (“Early Sufism” section through 127; 15 pages).
- Egger: Chapter 8, “The Consolidation of Traditions” (beginning through “Speculative Mysticism” section, stop before “Consolidating Institutions” section; 4 pages).
- Al-Qushayri on the meaning of Tasawwuf (from Knysh translation) (4 pages).
- Sells – *Early Islamic Mysticism* (1996), section on Rabia: pp. 151-169.

Session 24 (April 16): Turko-Perso-Islamicate Cosmopolis Agenda:

- Lecture: “Islamization of Africa, Africanization of Islam”
- Lecture: “Cultural Synthesis in Medieval Islam”

Assignments:

- “The Conversion Effect” in François-Xavier Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, trans. Troy Tice, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 69-73.
- Handout of Persian miniature paintings and translated poetry.
- Explore the Cambridge Shahnama Project (<http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/page/>)

Session 25 (April 21): Contours of Consensus in the Face of Political Upheaval Agenda:

- Lecture: “Mongol Apocalypse”
- Mini-Lecture: “Tying it All Together”

Assignments:

- Hend Gilli-Elewyt (trans.), “Al-awādi al-ğāmia: A Contemporary Account of the Mongol Conquest of Baghdad, 656/1258,” *Arabica* 58 (5): 353 – 371.
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I reserve the right to amend and update this syllabus throughout the semester.