

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 8:00 – 9:15am
- **Classroom:** 233 Lawrence Hall
- **Email:** pickettj@pitt.edu
- **Office:** 3908 Posvar (in annex to the right of dept.)
- **Office Hours:** TBD (3908 Posvar with Zoom available upon request: Zoom Link, 696-530-3747)
- **Course Policies:** <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.)

Readings from the Egger textbook are designated on the syllabus with the symbol; other secondary works available digitally in the shared folder are designated with the symbol, and primary sources available digitally in the shared folder are marked with a.

Useful Reference Works

- Encyclopedia 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 Qurʾān 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/>. Unless otherwise noted, all assignments are to be turned in via Canvas or TopHat (I will not accept paper or emailed copies).

Assignments

Study Guides

- Every week one assignment per unit will be posted on TopHat
- Designed to help guide you through difficult material, integrating lectures and the assigned readings
- Due on TopHat one hour after the class session with which they are associated
- Expectation: Complete responses relating to assigned readings before attending class, complete any remaining questions during class based on information presented during lecture, and then be ready to click 'submit' at the end of class
- If you are unsure about a question, simply raise your hand and ask! – everyone will benefit

In-Class Participation

- Assessed primarily through TopHat real-time quizzes
- Credit given for participation (even if you get a question wrong, you will still receive participation credit)
- Study guides are assessed based both on correctness and participation
- Completing in-class TopHat exercises without being present is considered cheating
- Three "grace days" provided when no participation points will be deducted for an absence

Midterm Essay

- **Length:** Approximately 700 words (3 pages)
- **Format:** In-class, handwritten essay
- **Materials:** Prompts provided a week in advance; you may consult any hard-copy references you wish (e.g., your notes, so long as they are printed out – up to ten printed pages); all notes must be turned in along with the essay itself
- **Revision Option:** You are welcome to revise your hand-written draft into a typed, electronically submitted revision by the specified date: the second grade will fully replace the first one

- One-week “grace period” after the final deadline marked on the syllabus until which time no points will be deducted

Final Paper

- **Length:** 1300 words (around 5-6 pages)
- **Format:** In-class, handwritten essay during designated finals period
- There is no “early bird” option for the final paper submission, though (as always) you are welcome to discuss your draft during office hours

Analytical Writing Skills Sequence (Optional) Learning to write persuasive, evidence-based essays is a major emphasis of this course. If you wish to receive feedback on your writing in advance of the formal essays, you are invited (but not required) to complete a cumulative series of mini-writing assignments designed to prepare you for the midterm and final paper. This three-part sequence is recommended, but entirely optional (though it will result in a modest extra credit bonus to the Midterm Essay category of your total grade).

Extra Credit Opportunities There will be numerous opportunities for extra credit (in the Participation category) throughout the semester. We are fortunate that Pitt hosts all sorts of interesting speakers relevant to course themes, which offers the potential to dramatically enrich your overall course experience. Generally, extra credit entails attending a university lecture and writing a short reflection relating the content to course themes (no more than a page). You are welcome to suggest extra credit assignments to me, as long as you do so at least three days in advance of the event itself, so that your colleagues also have the opportunity to attend.

Grading Policy

Grade Distribution

- **Participation:** 10%
- **Study Guides:** 25%
- **Midterm Essay:** 30%
- **Final Paper:** 35%

Grading Scale Letter grades will be assigned per the standard Canvas cutoffs, with one exception: only the highest two overall grades are eligible for an “A+”; other grades within the standard A+ range will be collapsed into the “A” category.

Study Guides and Participation If you complete most of the exercises (80% or higher), you will receive full credit (i.e., bumped up to 100%) in these categories; below 80% you will receive the raw score. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation grade, please discuss with the instructor during *office hours only*.

Absences and Makeup Work Everyone has hectic, challenging schedules, and unexpected hardships during the semester are a near-certainty. These course policies build in substantial flexibility for exactly that reason. If you miss an assignment, or cannot make it to a class, there are already systems in place to accommodate; nine times out of ten you will not need to get in touch with me separately. For extreme circumstances in which you require accommodations beyond the standard ones detailed below, I will require a note from your advisor.

University Policies

This syllabus assumes and incorporates the policies and procedures provided by Pitt’s Center for Teaching and Learning, including:

- Academic Integrity
- Disability Services
- Content Warning
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
- Email Communication
- Gender Inclusivity
- Health Safety Compliance
- Classroom Recording Policy

Although these policies are not reproduced here, all of them are important: please read them carefully and consider them part of the syllabus. It is particularly crucial that everyone is intimately aware of Pitt's current pandemic-related policies (e.g., masking).

Important Deadlines

Weekly Deadlines

- Reading assignments must be completed before the relevant class session
- Study guide due on TopHat one hour after the end of the relevant class session

One-Time Deadlines at a Glance

- **In-class Midterm Essay:** February 26
- **Revise and Resubmit Midterm Deadline:**
- **Final Paper Due:**

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 Avestan 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:

- 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-Elewy (trans.), “Al-awādi al-ġāmīa: A Contemporary Account of the Mongol Conquest of Baghdad, 656/1258,” *Arabica* 58 (5): 353 – 371.

I reserve the right to amend and update this syllabus throughout the semester.