

## **ISLAMIC TRADITIONS**

Hollins University  
Fall 2005  
Professor Darla Schumm

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

As a result of current events such as the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, North America's interest in Islam has increased greatly in recent years. Paralleling this growth in curiosity about Islam is a troubling growth in stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, due in large part to the influence of the media.

The primary objective of this course is to enable students to think critically about Islam and about how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in the media by engaging the basic history, teachings, scriptures, figures, beliefs, and practices of the tradition.

This course fulfills the ancient world and global systems perspectives and the oral communication skill of the Hollins University Education through Skills and Perspectives requirement.

We will begin the course by scrutinizing how the media construct reality and portray Islam, and in doing so we will also attempt to deconstruct our own misperceptions. Next we will examine the historical, doctrinal and ethical developments of Islam. This part of the course will explore the life of Muhammad, Muslim sacred texts, and religious practices and law.

The second part of the course will examine Islamic civilization and culture. We will discuss aspects of the Sunni/Shia split, the mystical tradition of Islam known as Sufism, and Islamic philosophy.

Finally, we will conclude the semester by exploring the modern phenomenon of Islam. We will discuss themes ranging from Orientalism, Islamic "fundamentalism," "jihad," the Nation of Islam, the role of Islam in the U.S., and the role of women in Islam.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

1. Neil Postman and Steve Powers, *How to Watch TV News* (New York: Penguin, 1992).
2. Omid Safi, Editor, *Progressive Muslims: On Gender, Justice, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003).
3. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994).
4. Karen Armstrong, *Mohammad: Biography of the Prophet*.

Recommended Web site:

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/index.htm>

### **COURSE EXPECTATIONS AND GRADING COMPONENTS**

1. Regular attendance, completion of daily reading assignments, and participation in class discussions – 20% of final grade.
2. 2-4 page book review of Armstrong book due September 27 – 10% of final grade.
3. Media assignment due October 20 – 15% of final grade.
4. 3-5 minute oral presentation summarizing the main points of the daily reading assignments and facilitation of class discussion. Each student must come to class with two questions based on the readings for the class to discuss. – 15% of final grade.
5. 5-7 page final paper based on your presentation topic for the group presentation due December 1 – 15% of final grade.

6. Group project and 10-15 minute oral presentation. Students will break into groups in the first several weeks of class and work together throughout the semester preparing a final presentation delivered at the end of the semester. Each group member will be responsible for 10-15 minutes of final presentation, but the combined individual presentations should reflect a cohesive group project. Criteria for evaluating the final presentation will be discussed in class – 25% of final grade.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

September 1:

Introduction to class, overview, and discussion of expectations

September 6:

"Here we are now, entertain us": Islam, Muslims and the American media

READING: First half of Postman and Powers book pg. 1-73.

Library lecture

September 8:

"Here we are now, entertain us": Islam, Muslims and the American media

READING: Second half of Postman and Powers book pg. 75-168.

September 13:

What is Islam? Methodological issues in this course. The roles of women and men in Islam

READING: Vision of Islam, Preface; Progressive Muslims, Chapter 5.

September 15:

Pre-Islamic Arabia to the time of Muhammad

READING: Vision of Islam, Introduction

September 20:

Muhammad's birth and early life. Muhammad's life to the Hijrah (622 C.E.)

READING: Progressive Muslims, Introduction, Chapter 10.

September 22:

Guest Lecture

September 27:

The Hijrah and the developments of the first Islamic community. The return to Mecca and the death of Muhammad

READING: Vision of Islam, Part I, Chapter 1.

Armstrong book review due

September 29:

The development of the Qur'an: The Meccan Revelations. The Qur'an continued: The Medinan and Later Meccan Revelations.

READING: Vision of Islam, Chapter 2.

October 4:

The Qur'an and the Hadith and the Traditions of the Prophet.

READING: Selections (to be announced in class) from the Qur'an found at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/index.htm>; Vision of Islam, Part II, Chapter 3.

October 6-7:

Fall Break

October 11:

The religious practices of Islam: The hadith of Gabriel revisited.

Reading: Vision of Islam, Chapter 4

October 13:

Islam (submission), Iman (faith) and Ihsan (doing what is beautiful)

READING: Vision of Islam, Chapters 5 and 6.

October 18:

Islamic law and religious ethics. The succession of Muhammad. The beginnings of the Sunni–Shi'i split. Shi'i Islamic doctrines and practices.

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapter 8.

October 20:

Sufism: The mystical dimension of Islam.

READING: Vision of Islam, Chapters 7 and 8.

Video on Sufism.

Media assignment due

October 25:

An introduction to Islamic philosophy and theology. Islamic thinkers from the classical to the pre-modern age.

Reading: Vision of Islam, Chapter 6

October 27:

Islamic civilization: The cities of Islam. The Islamic contribution to "the West"

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapters 3 and 4.

November 1:

Women and Islam

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapters 6 and 7.

November 3:

The impacts of feminism on Islam

Reading: Progressive Muslims, chapter 9.

Video on women in Islam

November 8:

Reform movements and thinkers in modern Islam. Orientalism, Islamic "fundamentalism" and the "Islamic threat"

Reading: Vision of Islam, Chapters 9 and 10

November 10:

Manufacturing Islam?: The meanings of "jihad." The "Rushdie Affair."

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapters 1, 12, and 14.

November 15:

Contemporary Islam in the United States: Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapters 11 and 13.

November 17:

The role of Islam in Canada and the United States. The study of Islam after September 11, 2001.

READING: Progressive Muslims, Chapter 2.

November 21-25:  
Thanksgiving Break

November 29:  
Catch up day

December 1:  
Student presentations  
Final paper due

December 6:  
Student presentations

### **Guidelines for Media Assignment**

#### **I. Assignment Objectives:**

1. To introduce students to the ways in which the media influence and construct how Islam and Muslims are perceived in the U.S.
2. To aid students in reflecting about how their own perceptions about Islam and Muslims have been constructed and influenced by the media.
3. To help students think critically about their own as well as general perceptions about Islam and Muslims.

#### **II. Instructions:**

1. Each student must choose one T.V. news show, one U.S. newspaper, and one foreign newspaper to watch and read. You will watch the same news show and read the same two newspapers throughout the course of the assignment.
2. You are required to keep a "news journal" where you collect newspaper articles and keep notes about the T.V. news.
3. You must watch the news show at least three times a week and jot down notes in your journal about how Islam and Muslims are represented in any of the stories. These can be direct or indirect references, i.e. references about terrorism, the war in Iraq, or tensions between differing Muslim groups. As you analyze the news show you are watching, try to assess if what you are seeing/hearing falls into the category of description, judgment, or inference (see Postman and Powers for a discussion of these terms and their definitions). Please feel free to add any additional observations or thoughts you have about the portrayals of Islam and Muslims.
4. You must also collect at least three articles a week from each of the two newspapers (you will gather six articles in total) you are reading about Islam and Muslims and put them in your journals. Jot down notes about the differences and similarities in how each newspaper represents and reports about Islam and Muslims. Take notes on any additional observations or thoughts you have regarding how Islam and Muslims are represented in the newspapers.
5. Each student must write a five-page paper reflecting on what she has observed and learned from her media inquiry.

6. Each student should use the Postman and Powers text as a tool and reference guide for her analysis of the visual and print news media. I expect you to engage the text in your paper.

**III. Guideline questions to help you write your paper:**

1. How do representations of Islam and Muslims differ between visual and print media? Provide specific examples.
2. How do representations of Islam and Muslims differ between the domestic and foreign newspapers? Provide specific examples.
3. What were your perceptions and ideas about Islam and Muslims before doing this assignment?
4. Where did most of your knowledge about Islam and Muslims come from prior to this assignment?
5. Have your perceptions and ideas about Islam and Muslims changed as a result of doing this assignment? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
6. What were your views about visual and print media before doing this assignment?
7. Have your views about print and visual media changed as a result of doing this assignment? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
8. How did the Postman and Powers text inform your assessment and analysis of visual and print media? Provide specific examples of concepts, ideas, critiques, or terminology that you used from the text.
9. If you were a T.V. or newspaper reporter, how would you approach your coverage of Islam and Muslims? Provide specific examples and identify what would influence your decisions regarding what to cover and not to cover.
10. Please include any other comments, reflections or observations you have.