

# Islamic Tradition



Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque (Brunei)

## About this Course **Islamic Tradition**

REL 207; Fall 2005  
Mondays and Wednesdays  
9:00 AM to 10:15 AM  
Blaustein Hall 210

## About the Instructor **Ahmed Afzaal**

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### **What to Expect in this Course**

The word "Islam" is used in many different ways. Most often, it means the particular religious teachings and practices believed to have been initiated by the Prophet Muhammad (571-632 CE), as developed, interpreted, and refined by many generations of his followers. In this sense, "Islam" is not a fixed "thing" but a fluid and dynamic process. In addition, the word "Islam" can also refer to the societies and cultures associated with various groups of people who identify themselves with this religion, or who have done so in the past. This is a less accurate use of the word; a better alternative would be "Islamicate," or simply "Muslim." In contemporary usage, the word "Islam" can also connote any set of beliefs and behaviors associated with a particular group of people who call themselves "Muslims." This is perhaps the least accurate use of this word; through this usage, *particular* beliefs and behaviors are *universalized* and projected on to a blank screen which is then labeled as "Islam." Consequently, what is a fluid and dynamic process is turned into a static "thing" with an unchanging "essence" or "nature" through the universalization of the particular.



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When we hear or see the word “Islam” being used in any context, we should pause and reflect on the exact connotations that are being implied by the speaker or writer. Often, confusions, misunderstandings, and false generalizations result because people are not careful and self-conscious when they use the word “Islam.”

This is an introductory course on Islam as a “religious” tradition. This means that we will focus on those specifically *religious* beliefs, rituals, ethical precepts, and spiritual practices that are believed to have been originated with the Prophet Muhammad himself, or that originated and/or developed among the subsequent generations of his followers, before gaining wide acceptance among Muslims.

Since Islam is a fluid and dynamic process, we will be looking at it as a living “tradition.” This means that we are going to approach Islam through some of the ways in which it has historically been viewed by the most sophisticated of its adherents, often called “ulama” or scholars of the tradition. Our primary aim is to understand Islam from within, i.e., from the viewpoint of Muslims in general and their traditional authorities in particular. We have to get an intuitive feeling for Islam as a religious tradition, so that what we understand would be recognized by most Muslims as accurately reflecting *their* viewpoint. We will achieve this “sympathetic” understanding of the Islamic religious tradition through working with two books: *The Vision of Islam* by Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, and “Four Pillars of Islam” by the Indian scholar Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi. In addition, we will study two chapters from *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, a book written by the Pakistani-American scholar Fazlur Rahman, as well as selected short chapters from the Qur’an as translated by Michael Sells in his book *Approaching the Qur’an*. It is hoped that these various sources will provide us with a somewhat balanced view of the Islamic religious tradition as understood by most Muslims.

Now, it goes without saying that religious traditions do not develop in a vacuum. They are developed by human beings within specific social, economic, cultural, and political contexts, and these contexts play a very important role in shaping any religious tradition. If we ignore these factors, our understanding of a religious tradition will remain incomplete and somewhat naïve. Consequently, we are going to complement our study of the Islamic religious tradition with a textbook that explicitly takes a historical viewpoint and analyzes the role of the factors mentioned above. This book is titled *A New Introduction to Islam* and is written by Daniel Brown.

It is hoped that by taking two different views, one from within and the other from without, we would be in a good position to learn the most that we can learn about Islam, given the limitations of this course.

Using these two viewpoints means developing a balanced vision of our subject matter. One of the points that we will emphasize in this course is that “Islam” is not a monolithic entity free of the effects of social and historical factors, but that it is a collection of somewhat diverse beliefs and practices that frequently vary from one Muslim society to another as well as undergo significant changes over time.

Having said this, however, we do not wish to commit the opposite mistake. Some would say that there is no such thing as “Islam” out there; instead of a single “Islam,” what we actually have are multiple “Islams,” each of which is created by a particular “interpretive community” by means of “discursive practices.” In other words, “Islam” does not exist independent of a group of people who talk about it; people bring their own brand of “Islam” into existence by developing a discourse about its nature. This viewpoint is often associated with “postmodernism.” In this course, we are not going to take this position. Instead, we would emphasize that despite all the diversity in Islamic beliefs and practices, it is still possible to discern certain constant and stable features in the Islamic religious tradition. Yet, we would acknowledge that there is definitely some danger involved in identifying those constant and stable features; this is a perilous terrain and we need to tread with a careful and self-critical awareness.

Perhaps the best approach is to take seriously the view from within, the viewpoint of the believers themselves. While Muslims throughout the world and throughout history would differ on the exact details of what “Islam” is and how to practice it, most Muslims would tend to agree on the centrality and authenticity of certain features irrespective of their social and historical contexts. For instance, Muslims would agree that believing in the unity of God is an indispensable characteristic of Islam, even though some of them might disagree about exactly what



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that entails. We can, therefore, take the belief in the unity of God as a constant and stable feature of the Islamic religious tradition, a feature that does not change from one society to another or from one historical period to another, even though it may be understood and interpreted differently by different “interpretative communities” among Muslims.

Our primary aim in this course is to understand these central and constant features from the viewpoint of the Islamic religious tradition itself, i.e., from the viewpoint of Muslim authorities who have been widely accepted as such by most Muslims. At the same time, we would be paying due attention to the socio-historical context within which the Islamic tradition (along with the work of these authorities) originated and flourished.

Students taking this course should be aware that it will not make them experts on Islam, for the subject matter is too vast and deep to be mastered in a single semester (or, indeed, in a single life-time). However, if they study diligently according to the instructor’s expectations, they may hope to develop an understanding of the Islamic religious tradition that will be far superior to that of the average American.

## Grading and Evaluation

Your grade in this course will depend on attendance, class participation, a midterm exam, and a final exam.

**Attendance : (10%)** I take your presence in the class very seriously. This means that your attendance is *not* optional in this course; it is required for each class meeting. Frequent late arrivals and early departures will negatively affect your grade; so would unexcused or habitual absence.

**Class Participation: (20%)** Generally speaking, the number of pages you are required to read for each class is relatively low for this course. I expect you to compensate this low quantity by putting in some high quality work. As a general rule, for each hour of class time you must spend three hours studying on your own. In this course, I expect you to read very thoroughly and very thoughtfully, since you don’t have to read too much. Participation means that you come to each class after having read the assigned readings, preferably two or more times, and after having thought about the questions that I will provide for each reading. This should prepare you for answering most questions that I might ask in the class, as well as for coming up with your own questions and comments. For me, the single most accurate way of measuring your progress during the semester is how well you perform in the class.

**Midterm Exams: (30%)** There will be two midterm exams; each will consist of multiple choice questions as well as those requiring short answers (about 50-75 words for each answer). These will be “take-home” tests, due back in my office or mail box by noon the next day. Dates for the exams will be announced later.

**Final Exam: (40%)** This will take place after the end of classes. It will be similar to your midterm exam, except that it will cover *all* the readings.



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## Syllabus and Schedule

### 1st Week: Introduction to the Course

Monday, September 5: The Polyvalence of “Islam”  
Wednesday, September 7: Coming to Terms

### 2nd Week: Life of the Prophet Muhammad

Monday, September 12: *The Vision of Islam*.  
“Introduction” pp. xiii-xxxix  
Wednesday, September 14: *A New Introduction to Islam*. pp. 69-83.

### 3rd Week: Islam as Submission

Monday, September 19: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 3-27.  
Wednesday, September 21: Video (*Islam: The Empire of Faith*)

### 4th Week: Rituals of Worship-I

Monday, September 26: *Four Pillars of Islam*,  
“Prayer”  
Wednesday, September 28: *Four Pillars of Islam*,  
“Zakat”

### 5th Week: Rituals of Worship-II

Monday, October 3: *Four Pillars of Islam*, “Fasting”  
Wednesday, October 5: *Four Pillars of Islam*, “Hajj”

### 6th Week: Islamic Ethics

Monday, October 10: Rahman “Man as Individual”  
Wednesday, October 12: Rahman “Man in Society”

### 7th Week: Islamic Jurisprudence

Monday, October 17: *The Vision of Islam*. 28-34.  
Wednesday, October 19: *A New Introduction to Islam*.  
pp. 116-134.

### 8th Week: Faith & Beliefs—God & Angels

Monday, October 24: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 37-67  
Wednesday, October 26: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 67-104.

### 9th Week: The Measuring Out and Prophecy

Monday, October 31: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 104-131.  
Wednesday, November 2: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 132-164.

### 10th Week: Belief in Prophecy and the Return

Monday, November 7: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 164-192.  
Wednesday, November 9: *The Vision of Islam*, pp. 193-235.

### 11th Week: The Qur’an

Monday, November 14: Michael Sells, Short Surahs  
Wednesday, November 16: *A New Introduction to Islam*, pp. 53-68.

### 12th Week: Enjoy your Break!

Monday, November 21: No Class (AAR)  
Wednesday, November 23: Thanksgiving

### 13th Week: Theology & Philosophy

Monday, November 28: *A New Introduction to Islam*.  
pp. 135-153.  
Wednesday, November 30: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 236-264.

### 14th Week: Islamic Spirituality

Monday, December 5: *The Vision of Islam*. pp. 267-294.  
Wednesday, December 7: *A New Introduction to Islam*. pp. 154-174.

### 15th Week: Islamic Views of Warfare & Gender

Monday, December 12: Chittick, “Theological Roots of Peace and War in Islam”  
Wednesday, December 14: Murata, “Tao of Islam” Chapter 2 and Postscript.