ISLA 370: The Qur’an: History and Interpretation

Professor Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim

Fall 2014

Classroom: ARTS W-20

Hours: 1:05 PM – 2:25 MW – Leacock 210

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Office: Morrice Hall Rm. 310

Professor’s office hours: Mondays 2:30-4:30 PM

Course description

*The Qur’an: History and Interpretation* examines the teachings, form, history, and modes of interpretation of the Qur’anic text in both the modern (starting in the 19th century) and pre-modern periods. We will discuss what the Qur’an means to Muslims as a religious text, as well as its influence and centrality in other disciplines such as law, literature, and theology. Students will be exposed to traditional hermeneutical approaches, as well as reformist approaches such as feminist and modernist interpretations of the Qur’an. In approaching scholarship on the Qur’an, we use a historical-critical approach, rather than a theological, faith-based approach.

The lecturing style will not be linear. The professor will problematize the grand narrative as he lectures. It is the professor’s philosophy that while a linear style might be easier to digest, learning and unlearning (by challenging the premises of the overall narrative) is a much more useful, though challenging, way of thinking.

Course Requirements and Evaluation

**20% Participation (both in class and online)**

Students are required to attend each class and participate based on their understanding of the readings. Students should always come to class prepared to (1) present a theme for discussion (2) offer brief thoughts, (3) ask questions, (4) provide reflections on how the readings relate to previous discussions, and/or (5) critique the author’s arguments. You should write your thoughts on every reading. It is as important as doing the readings.

**20% Debates**

Four times a semester debates will be held in class on topics that students will have previously discussed from the readings and lectures. Each student will participate in one debate with three students debating per side. It is important to come to the debates prepared. Each debate will
require careful examination of the course readings and lecture content as well as some outside research. Students will be evaluated by their peers as well as the professor. The themes will be posted online for students to discuss. Participation in those online discussions will count toward the course participation grade.

20% reading presentations
A group of 3-4 students will be responsible for raising questions and managing class discussions for one week of classes. Their tasks are to:
1) Send a list of 3-5 themes/questions about the readings by 1 PM of the Saturday before that week. This list should be based on a close reading of the texts and a good understanding of the main points.
2) Come with a list of themes to discuss in class. Have prompts for students and manage discussions. Students will be encouraged to call on students by name to participate and to voice their views.
3) Other students will grade these presentations.

30% Final Paper
Students are required to write a typed 15-page paper (double-spaced, 12-point font, one-inch margins) on a topic related to the Qur’ān (the history of the text, its interpretation, its reception, etc.). An outline of the paper will be due about a month before the final paper due date.

10% peer review of final paper
The final paper will be graded by a peer with full justification of the assigned grade. If student A reviews student B’s paper, B cannot review A’s paper to avoid a conflict of interest.

NB: Students are required to meet and work with other students in small groups both inside and outside the classroom.

Portfolio
Each student will be required to bring a portfolio of all written work, and contributions to online discussions. This portfolio will be due with the final paper. Peer reviews and other evaluations of other students should also be included in the portfolio.

Class Policies
- Students may not use computers inside the classroom for any purpose other than writing class-related notes. Any student violating this rule will be banned from bringing a computer into the classroom and maybe asked to leave the class, in which case (s)he would be considered absent on that day. No Facebook, please!
- You are allowed only one unexcused absence; the second unexcused absence will reduce your class participation grade by one level (e.g. A to A-) and the third by another level and so on.
• Late assignments will be penalized at the rate of one grade per day (e.g. an A will be A- if late for one day and B+ if late for two days). Extensions will be granted only in cases of genuine emergency.
• No incompletes will be given except in cases of genuine emergency.
• In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures. Please refer to the Handbook of Students Rights and Responsibilities for more information.

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Written Work in French

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.”

"Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue)."

Required Books (available at the bookstore and on reserve)

• Coursepack
• Asma Barlas, Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qur’an (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002).
• Barbara Freyer Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Reference Works and Guides

The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an
The Encyclopaedia of Islam
Introduction (Week 1)
Wednesday, September 3
• Terminology
• What do you want to learn about the Qur’an and why? What are the approaches you would use to study it?

Who can interpret? (Week 2) 83 pages
Monday, September 8
• Aaron W. Hughes, “When Bad Scholarship is Just Bad Scholarship: A Response to Omid Safi,” Bulletin for the Study of Religion (February 3, 2014): 1-6

Recommended Readings

Wednesday, September 10
• Fred McGraw Donner, “Mecca’s Food Supplies and Muhammad’s Boycott,” Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient 20, No. 3 (1997) 249-266

Recommended Readings
• Russell McCutcheon, ‘It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!’: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 74, No. 3 (September 2006): 720-750

Formation and Chronology (Week 3) 85 pages
Monday, September 15

Wednesday, September 17
The Form of the Qur’an: Meccan and Medinan Suras (Week 4) 84 pages

Debate #1: Who has the right to interpret the Qur’an? All students are expected to post their views on this theme online.

Monday, September 22


- Qur’an 2:106 Abrogation (READ THE TAIFSIR ONLINE)

Wednesday, September 24


The Qur’an: A Comparative Perspective (Week 5) 99 pages

Monday, September 29


Wednesday, October 1


- Qur’an 12:24 Joseph (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)

- Qur’an 2:127 (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)

Recommended Readings


Literary Approaches to the Qur’an (Week 6) 79 pages

Monday, October 6


Wednesday, October 8


- Qur’an 4:12 and 4:11 (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)
Qur’anic Interpretation (Week 7) 51 pages
Monday, October 13
• NO CLASS
• Thanksgiving Monday

Debate #2: Is the Qur’an an authentic text? All students are expected to post their views on this theme online.
Wednesday, October 15

Modern Approaches (Week 8) 71 pages
Monday, October 20
• Abdullah Saeed, Interpreting the Qur’an: towards a contemporary approach (New York: Routledge, 2005): 9-25

Wednesday, October 22
Final paper outline due today
• Quran 9:5 The Sword Verse (READ TAFSIR ONLINE)

Modern and Feminist Approaches (Week 9) 73 pages
Debate #3: Does the Qur’an promote peace or violence? All students are expected to post their views on this theme online.
Monday, October 27

Wednesday, October 29

Modern and Feminist Approaches (Week 10) 78 pages
Monday, November 3
• *Qur’an* 27:55 (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)

Wednesday, November 5
• *Qur’an* 4:34 Hitting Verse (READ TAFSIR ONLINE)

Modern and Feminist Approaches (Week 11) 80 pages

Debate #4: Does the Qur’an promote women’s rights or women’s oppression? All students are expected to post their views online.

Monday, November 10

Wednesday, November 12
• *Qur’an* 27:23 & 33:53, female ruler verse (READ THE TAFSIR ONLINE)

Modern and Feminist Approaches (Week 12) 80 pages

*Final paper and portfolio due today*

Monday, November 17
• *Qur’an* 2:36 (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)

Wednesday, November 19
• Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur’an, Traditions and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 82-134
• *Qur’an* 33:50 (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)

Modern and Feminist Approaches (Week 13) 80 pages

Monday, November 24
  http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb044178
• *Qur’an 24:35*, female ruler verse (READ THE TAFSIR ONLINE)

Wednesday, November 26
• “Rethinking Islamic Reform: Hamza Yusuf & Tariq Ramadan”
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qY17d4ZhY8M
• *Qur’an 24:35* (READ IT ON http://quran.com/)