

# Being Muslim in America

REL/HIS 221  
Grinnell College  
#BMAGrinnell

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Muslims have been a part of American life for a very, very long time, and yet the very presence of Muslims and Muslim communities in the United States has never been more fraught than it is today. This course will explore the history and contemporary realities of Muslims in America. Of particular interest is how race, class, and gender have intersected in the history of Islam and Muslim communities in the United States—and how these intersections relate to the conditions in which Muslims have sought, or not, to live as Muslims in a non-Muslim land. To facilitate this work, we will begin with a more general consideration of religion in American life and an analysis of theoretical perspectives on the nature of public life. We will then dive into the history of Muslims, Muslim communities, and Islam in the United States, making our way into the current moment.

As you will see, much of the work of the course is built around developing research skills that will help you complete a research project that will unfold over the entire semester. We will place particular emphasis on developing a research question and staging the research process: pursuing your chosen topic, identifying and selecting different kinds of sources (reflecting the kind of project you pursue), and presenting your work in different forms. Working on these skills at the 200-level will prepare you for advanced work in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Our work this semester will unfold on the ancestral territory of the Meskwaki, Sauk, and Iowa peoples, whose land was taken from them through the encroachment of white settlers and then formally in 1845 through an official government policy known as Indian removal. Today, members of the Meskwaki nation continue to live, work, and raise families on the Meskwaki Settlement in Tama County, Iowa, less than 30 miles from Grinnell College.

## LEARNING COMMUNITY

We will read together, discuss together, create together. If we approach this work with a spirit of generosity we will also have many opportunities to grow together. Practicing a spirit of generosity is the **foundational expectation** of our course. I use the word practice very intentionally.

In *Generous Thinking*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes, “Practices are not about perfection but about a continual, impossible attempt to perfect. They are ways of being in the world.” (68) She suggests that a key element of generosity as practice is critical humility, which requires that in order to truly listen to each other “we must not only refrain from assuming that everyone else is in the wrong, but we also must remain open to the real possibility that *we might be*.” (40) Fitzpatrick follows this with a simple, though very difficult, formula for generous thinking: Assume positive intent; own negative effects. This is generous thinking as a practice, a habit of mind.

We will all have missteps in our work together. Assume positive intent. Own negative effects. We will—we should—disagree with readings and with each other. Assume positive intent. Own negative effects. This is generous thinking as practice. Developing this practice is very much part of this class.

#### COURSE TEXTS:

Timothy Beal, *Religion in America: A Very Short Introduction*

Edward Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History*

Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*

Denise Spellberg, *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders*

These texts, which are on reserve at the library, form the backbone of our course. Throughout the semester we will also be working with other sources, both scholarly and primary. Some of our readings are on electronic reserve, in which case they are accessible via “Library Resources” on our Blackboard course site (these readings will have “R” next to them on the syllabus).

You can read scholarly sources with a few questions in mind:

- Can you identify a sentence or sentences that constitute the thesis statement?
- Can you state the author’s thesis—even regarding a single chapter or article— succinctly in your own words?
- If part of a larger work, how does a particular chapter or chapters fit into the bigger picture? If a stand-alone piece, can you relate this reading to another that we have completed in the course?
- Can you identify at least two examples the author uses to support their argument?
- How does the reading relate to the broad questions we discussed at the beginning of the course?

As you read the primary sources with which we will work, please keep the following questions in mind:

- Who is writing/producing the material? What do you think their purpose was in so doing?
- What is the larger relevant context of the material's production? What is the author's relative position of power in that context? And how is that affecting how/what they present?
- Where relevant, how does this document support or call into question claims made by the authors of our secondary sources?

From a skill-building perspective, then, **two important course learning goals** of this course are (1) reading scholarly sources for argument and presenting that argument and exemplary evidence in succinct terms and (2) cultivating the ability to develop contextually sensitive understandings of primary source documents.

#### COURSE EVALUATION AND POLICIES:

##### Course Engagement: 20%

Your participation in this course is an essential component of its success. Participation includes regular attendance. Anything beyond two unexcused absences will result in a reduction of your grade. (I realize that things come up—the key to managing your various responsibilities is open communication.) I also expect you to be on time. However, participation includes much more than attendance. Your participation grade is a reflection of your **engagement** with the course. I understand that not everyone chooses to speak in each class session. There are lots of other ways to show engagement: Make eye contact during lecture; when I request that you post to the course site, do so thoughtfully and punctually; come by office hours now and then—even if you don't have a particular agenda; be sure you proof-read and edit *all* your written work carefully—the quality of your efforts in this regard plays a role in your engagement grade, too. At the same time, nothing illustrates engagement like a willingness to be a vocal participant in our course. In the end, your (individual and collective) engagement with the course will be a significant determinant of what kind of experience we have together.

##### Course Journal: 15%

You will be responsible for maintaining a weekly journal for this course. As you will see below, your journaling will be the foundation of a lot of the work you complete in this class. Each entry should be between 250-300 words. I will be reading your journals, but won't necessarily comment on individual entries. The more work you put into this assignment the easier much of the other work in the course will become. You will be responsible for thirteen entries. Each should be

complete by noon on Sunday. I lay out the particulars for journal entries over the course of the semester below. Beyond these guidelines, however, I encourage you to also use your journals to include thoughts relating to the course in general. I will assign a mid-term journal grade (5% of your course grade) and a final journal grade (10% of your course grade).

#### Short Essay I: 10%

This essay 2-3 pp. essay will build on work from one of our library days together. You will describe and use one of the theories about publics/public life we've discussed to *analyze* an event or incident that relates to course themes.

#### Short Essay II: 15%

This essay will be a 3-5 pp. presentation of your final research question set in the context of our course materials and themes. A successful essay will draw on specific journal entries and course materials to demonstrate how your topic and question developed over time. It will also provide evidence of thinking about what kinds of materials you think could help you address your topic/answer your question. Along with this essay, you will also submit an annotated bibliography for three-to-five core sources.

#### Elevator Pitch: 5%

It's very important to be able to describe the work you do in very concise terms. On the next-to-last day of classes, you will each have 30 seconds to offer a pithy and compelling description of your final project, plus 2:30 minutes more to respond to a prompt: "*How interesting! Tell me more!*"

#### Final Research Project: 35%

This 12-15 pp. essay (not including bibliography formatted according to Chicago style) or alternative project is the culmination of a semester-long research process. It will be due by the end of finals week. Whatever the medium, you will build this project on the foundation of a sound research question.

To facilitate a third core **course learning goal**, developing and pursuing a research question, I have staged a process that will help you work on a number of research-related skills, including reflection, moving from interest to question, moving from question to *research* question, and thinking about what kinds of resources you might need to answer that research question.

- Weeks 2-4: Identifying areas of interest
  - Each week, your journal should provide a synopsis of readings and discussion as well as one thing that especially captures your interest from the week's work.

- Week 5: Identifying a theory of interest
  - In your week 5 journal, please identify which theory you selected, why you selected it, and how it helped you think about your short essay topic.
  
- Weeks 6-9: Formulating questions for (potential) further consideration
  - Each week, your journal should provide an annotation of readings and synopsis of discussion and a description of one thing that captured your interest—plus a “translation” of that area of interest into a question.
  
- Weeks 10-11: Working on research skills and questions
  - Readings during this period of the course will be particularly light. This will facilitate some research practice and some reflection on potential research topics/questions.
  - Journals for these two weeks should focus on the identification of potential research topics out of past and current course material. Each potential topic should come with a research question and one possible related resource. I would aim for two potential topics/questions per journal, one from past work and one from the work completed just the week before.
  
- Weeks 12-14: Crafting and Pursuing a Research Question
  - These three weeks will be a time for the scaffolding work you have done to come together. To facilitate this process:
    - I will meet with each of you individually to help refine your research question.
    - You will complete a short essay that lays out your research question and connects it to course themes and materials.
    - We will have a library session focusing on the identification of scholarly resources. Recall the treatment of an article on digital publics you completed earlier this semester. The first two paragraphs of that treatment are what you find for each source in an annotated bibliography.
  - Journals for this period should be about reflecting on the research process: What is your project about? And why does it matter (the “so what” question)? What kinds of sources do you need to answer your research question? Expect this to be a messy process!
    - You will also be working with a research partner during this time. It will be very informal—really this is about creating a low-stakes accountability mechanism and to have someone to bounce ideas off of, including practicing your elevator pitches! I’ll expect to see a little reflection in your journal during this period about working with your research partner.

Course and Community Policies:

- Email policy part I: I am generally good about returning email in a reasonable amount of time. Please always reach out to your colleagues first with logistical questions about our course. If you can't figure out the answer, then by all means get in touch—in such a situation your confusion is likely because of my error or because I haven't been sufficiently clear. You can always ask in class, too, and you will find that I am quite accessible outside of class. I'd much rather meet you in person—and you can email to set up an appointment! [This policy does not apply to real emergencies.]
- Email policy part II: I encourage you to use email to share interesting news or course-related information you come across. This is actually a great way to help promote a collective learning experience.
- I provide plenty of notice for each of the assignments—it is your responsibility to plan your time accordingly. This makes me not very inclined to say yes to extension requests. That said, please do not be shy about approaching me for an extension if you have extenuating circumstances. It is essential to keep lines of communication open.
- Please don't use computers or other devices in class for anything other than taking notes or document viewing. Cell phones should be on silent. (Remind me to tell you a story about this.)
- If you are involved in an extracurricular activity that will take you away from campus be sure to let me know beforehand. Regardless of the reason (except for dire family emergency, hospitalization), if I do not hear from you *before* you miss class I will assume you are using one of your unexcused absences.
- Breaches of academic integrity will result in an official disciplinary process guided by the Dean's office. Although I will inform you of any action I take where appropriate, I will not negotiate with you privately about such matters. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism I suggest you consult the Student Handbook immediately.
- Having a fully inclusive classroom (and course in general) is very important to me. I welcome individual students to talk to me about learning needs. In particular, I encourage students with disabilities to let me know how our classroom or course activities could impact the disability and what accommodations would be essential to you. You will also need to have a conversation about and provide documentation of your disability to the Coordinator for Student Disability Resources, John Hirschman, located on the 3rd floor of Goodnow Hall (x3089).
- I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Lab, which is located in HSSC N3129. We can all improve our writing—and they can help with other kinds of projects and presentations, too. Writing Lab instructors don't proofread. They can help brainstorm ideas, strengthen arguments, choose and analyze evidence, focus paragraphs, craft introductions and conclusions, rewrite sentences, organize and revise whole drafts, plan presentations, and more. For a link to the schedule and appointment system, search "Writing Lab" on grinnell.edu or grinnellshare.grinnell.edu.
- If there is something happening in the classroom—or any learning space associated with the class—that is getting in the way of your ability to get the

most out of this learning experience, please don't stay silent. You can talk to me if you're comfortable. If you'd rather speak with someone else, I recommend Chinyere Ukabiala, the College's Ombudsperson. If *I'm* doing something that is preventing you from getting the most out of this learning experience, please speak with the Ombudsperson and she will help you figure out next steps.

## RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPES

### AUGUST 30

- Introductions

### SEPTEMBER 2

- Beal, *Religion in America*, pp. 1-57
- Mapping your religious landscape (literally and figuratively): your hometown and your experience (Blackboard post)

### SEPTEMBER 4

- Beal, *Religion in America*, pp. 59-114
- Mapping *our* religious landscape: Grinnell(s) (Blackboard post)

### SEPTEMBER 6

- Jamal and Albana, "Demographics, Political Participation, and Representation," in *CCAI*, pp. 98-118.
- Find and write one paragraph about a story that illuminates one or more element of this chapter. This can include material on the 2018 election cycle, which saw significant increases in Muslim candidates for office. Be sure to clearly connect your story to an element of Jamal and Albana. Please also write a brief second paragraph describing how you went about finding your story, including your search process and where you found the story you selected. Post your reflection paragraph to Blackboard by **Thursday, September 5, by 3 p.m.**

## THEORETICAL FRAMES: WHAT IS "THE PUBLIC?" AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

### SEPTEMBER 9

- Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics." (R)

SEPTEMBER 11

- Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics.” (R)

SEPTEMBER 13

- Library Day: Phil Jones on finding scholarly sources relating to digital publics
  - Prepare three paragraphs about a scholarly article or chapter relating to digital publics. In your three paragraphs, present the author’s thesis statement and/or central argument, describe two pieces of evidence the author uses to support their argument, and explain how the article relates to Michael Warner’s theorization about publics and counterpublics. The Blackboard post is due by **Sunday, September 15, at 3 p.m.**

SEPTEMBER 16

- Calhoun, “Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere.” (R)

SEPTEMBER 18

- Curtis, Chapter Five in *MIA*, pp. 97-118.
- Hicks, “Religious Pluralism, Secularism, and Interfaith Endeavors,” in *CCAI*, pp. 156-169.

SEPTEMBER 20 [MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY]

- Library Day: Phil Jones on researching with popular media sources
  - Find a story in a popular media source that demonstrates the kind of power relationship that Hicks describes in “Religious Pluralism, Secularism, and Interfaith Endeavors.”
  - Based on your work during the library session, prepare two-to-three double-spaced pages in which you describe and use one of the theories about publics/public life we’ve discussed or that you found to *analyze* the event or incident that your selection covers. Your short essay is due **Friday, September 27.**

SEPTEMBER 23

- Painter and Philo, “Spaces of Citizenship” (R)

SEPTEMBER 25

- D-Lab Day: Exploring Mapping Islamophobia

SEPTEMBER 27

- Group Work Day: Exploring Mapping Islamophobia
- Blackboard post due on **Sunday, September 29**, at 3 p.m.

ENSLAVEMENT, INCLUSION, EXCLUSION

SEPTEMBER 30

- Curtis, Preface and Chapter One in *MIA*, pp. ix-24.
- Turner, “African American Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America,” in *CCAI*, pp. 28-44.

OCTOBER 2

- “The Life of Omar Ibn Said, Written by Himself,” in *A Muslim American Slave*. (R)

OCTOBER 4

- Spellberg, Introduction and Chapter Five, in *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an*, pp. 3-12 and 158-196.

OCTOBER 7

- Spellberg, Afterword, in *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an*, pp. 270-302.

CONVERSION, IMMIGRATION, AND THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN ISLAM

OCTOBER 9

- Curtis, Chapter Two in *MIA*, pp. 25-30.
- Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, Selections from *Islam in America and Other Writings*. (R)

OCTOBER 11

- Curtis, Chapter Two in *MIA*, pp. 31-46.
- “Satan” and “Black Muslims,” in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (R)

OCTOBER 14

- Taylor, “Introduction” and “Flexing a New Womanhood,” in *the Promise of Patriarchy*. (R)

OCTOBER 16

- Entry on James Baldwin from *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (P-Web)
- James Baldwin, “[Letter from a Region in My Mind](#).” (Online & P-Web)
  - This is a long reading. Please be sure to budget a little bit more time than you normally would.

OCTOBER 18

- “Mecca” in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (R)

OCTOBER 28

- Curtis, Chapter Three in *MIA*, pp. 47-71.
- “1965” in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (R)

OCTOBER 30

- Abdullah, “American Muslims in the Contemporary World: 1965 to the Present,” in *CCAI*, pp. 65-82.
- Curtis, Chapter Four in *MIA*, pp. 72-96.

CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPES OF/IN AMERICAN MUSLIM LIFE

NOVEMBER 1

- Leonard, “Organizing Communities: Institutions, Networks, and Groups,” in *CCAI*, pp. 170-189.

NOVEMBER 4

- Moore, “Muslims in the American Legal System,” in *CCAI*, pp. 139-155.

NOVEMBER 6

- Echchaibi, “American Muslims and the Media,” in *CCAI*, pp. 119-138.

NOVEMBER 8 [FORDHAM UNIVERSITY]

- Breath.

NOVEMBER 11

- Majeed, “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family,” in *CCAI*, pp. 312-329.

NOVEMBER 13

- Yuskaev, “Muslim Public Intellectuals and Global Muslim Thought,” in *CCAI*, pp. 266-278.

NOVEMBER 15

- Hammer, “Studying American Muslim Women: Gender, Feminism, and Islam,” in *CCAI*, pp. 330-344.

BUILDING A RESEARCH PROJECT

NOVEMBER 18: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Individual Meetings

NOVEMBER 20: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Individual Meetings

NOVEMBER 22

- Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History,” in *CCAI*, pp. 15-27.
- Library day: Scholarly Sources
- Formulating (and sharing) a work plan

NOVEMBER 25 [AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION]

- Workday: Research Questions and Sources

NOVEMBER 27 [AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION]

- Workday: Research Questions and Sources
- **Short Essay II Due**

FINAL STRETCH

During these last weeks of the semester, in addition to meeting with me I expect that you will meet with Phil Jones or the student research assistants available to you at the circulation desk of Burling Library. They are there to help! Your research partners will also be a great resource for staying on track.

DECEMBER 2

- Research/Writing/Individual Meetings

DECEMBER 4

- Research/Writing/Individual Meetings

DECEMBER 6

- Writing/Research/Individual Meetings

DECEMBER 9

- Writing/Research/Individual Meetings

DECEMBER 11

- Elevator Pitching

**DECEMBER 13—WRAP-UP**