

Being Muslim in America

REL 295-06/HIS 295-02 (SPRING 2017) GRINNELL COLLEGE

Caleb Elfenbein

ELFENBEI@GRINNELL.EDU

MACY HOUSE, X. 4352

OFFICE HOURS: T, 9:30-10:30 (GRILL) & W, 2-3

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 and the emergence of peculiarly American forms of Islam and Muslim community life. Of particular interest is how race, class, and gender have intersected in the history of Islam and Muslim communities in the United States, especially regarding inclusion or exclusion in public life and 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 written, digital, and verbal forms. Working on these skills at the 200-level will prepare you for advanced work in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

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 these 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), or they are on the course site itself (these readings will have “pweb” next to them).

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 her or his argument?
- How does the reading relate to the broader 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 was her or his purpose 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%

As the weighty percentage indicates, I consider your participation in this course to be an essential component of its success. Participation includes regular attendance. In this vein, anything beyond two unexcused absences will result in a reduction of your participation grade. (I realize that things come up—the key to managing your various responsibilities is open communication.) Chronic tardiness will not help your cause, either. 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).

Video Essay: 20%

Early in the semester, you will work with a group to produce a video essay. A successful video essay will demonstrate an ability to apply a theoretical model to data, displaying many of the same elements as a written essay. The assignment sheet for the video essay will constitute 3% of your course grade, the script for your video essay will constitute 7% of your course grade, while the final video essay product will constitute 10% of your course grade. This project requires equal participation. If you are concerned about the division of responsibilities, you can talk to me or you can use the College Ombuds as a resource.

Short Essay: 10%

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.

Presentation: 10%

Your presentation late in the semester will provide you with an opportunity to share your project with your classmates. Planned for week fourteen, these presentations will also keep you on track to complete your research project by the end of finals week.

Final Research Project: 25%

This five-minute video essay or 10-12 pp. essay (not including bibliography formatted according to Chicago style) 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 1-3: Identifying areas of interest
 - Each week, your journal should provide a synopsis of readings and discussion as well as one thing that captures your interest from the week's work.
- Week 4: Identifying a theory of interest
 - In your week 4 journal, please identify which theory you selected, why you selected it, and how your group discussion played out.
 - Include reading from February 17 in your week 5 journal entry.
- Weeks 5-8: 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 9-10: 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 11-13: 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.
- 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!

Course 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; you can do so via the email function on the course site. If no one can figure out the answer, then by all means get in touch. 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.
- Unless I instruct otherwise, submit non-Blackboard written work to elfenbei.grinnell@gmail.com. Please be sure to submit all work as pdf. The subject of your submission email should include your last name and the name of the assignment indicated on the assignment prompt. Unless otherwise noted, assignments are due by 5 p.m. on the date indicated in the syllabus.
- Know that I am pre-disposed to saying no to requests for extensions. I provide plenty of notice for each of the assignments—it is your responsibility to plan your time accordingly. 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.
- If I suspect that you are using computers in class for anything other than note taking or document viewing, you will lose your computer privileges for the remainder of the semester. (If I suspect that you are texting in class I will ask that you leave your phone with me at the start of each class. Cell phones should be set on silent.)
- 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 simply skipping class. An after-the-fact note from Health Services will not suffice.
- 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, 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.
- It is essential to me that everyone in the class has the same opportunity to thrive. Please communicate with me, either directly or through the accommodations office, about any needs you have that are on file with the College and we will work together to make sure that you get the most out of this learning experience.

RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPES

JANUARY 23

- Introductions

JANUARY 25

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

JANUARY 27

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

JANUARY 30

- Jamal and Albana, “Demographics, Political Participation, and Representation,” in *CCAI*, pp. 98-118.
- Find and write about a story in popular media that illuminates one or more element of this chapter. (Blackboard post)

THEORETICAL FRAMES: WHAT IS “THE PUBLIC?” AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

FEBRUARY 1

- Calhoun, “Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere.” (R)

FEBRUARY 3

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

FEBRUARY 6

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

FEBRUARY 8

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

FEBRUARY 10

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

FEBRUARY 11-12: GROUP MEETINGS

- In lieu of reading and class preparation, you will meet with your group to discuss and select a theory you would be interested in using to analyze a contemporary event or development relating to American Muslims or American Muslim communities.

FEBRUARY 13

- LIBRARY SESSION WITH PHIL JONES: IDENTIFYING MEDIA RESOURCES

FEBRUARY 13, 14, OR 15

- In lieu of reading and class preparation, you will meet with your group to discuss events/developments you identified in your library session and to select the event/development you would like to analyze in your video essay.

FEBRUARY 15

- MIKE CONNER AND PHIL JONES: VIDEO ESSAY PROCESS AND MATERIALS SEARCH

ENSLAVEMENT, INCLUSION, EXCLUSION

FEBRUARY 17

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

FEBRUARY 18-19

- Based on the February 15 meeting, divvy up the components of the project and begin preparation for February 22-24. E-mail your assignment sheet to elfenbei.grinnell@gmail.com by Sunday, February 19, at 5 p.m.

FEBRUARY 20:

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

FEBRUARY 22

- SESSION WITH MIKE CONNER: VIDEO ESSAY PRODUCTION 101

FEBRUARY 24

- WORK SESSION WITH MIKE CONNER

FEBRUARY 27

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

MARCH 1

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

CONVERSION, IMMIGRATION, AND THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN ISLAM

MARCH 3

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

**SUNDAY, MARCH 5: VIDEO ESSAYS DUE 5 P.M. EMAIL SCRIPT TO
ELFENBEI.GRINNELL@GMAIL.COM**

MARCH 6

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

MARCH 8

- Entry on James Baldwin from *Encyclopedia of American Literature* (pweb)
- James Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind." (R)

MARCH 10

- "Mecca" in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (pweb)

MARCH 13

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

MARCH 15

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

MARCH 17

- SUBMIT JOURNAL. BREATH. ENJOY.

CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPES OF/IN AMERICAN MUSLIM LIFE

APRIL 3

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

APRIL 5

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

APRIL 7

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

APRIL 10

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

APRIL 12

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

APRIL 14

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

BUILDING A RESEARCH PROJECT

APRIL 17: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Individual Meetings

APRIL 19: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Individual Meetings

APRIL 21: **ESSAY DUE**

- Curtis, "The Study of American Muslims: A History," in *CCAI*, pp. 15-27.
- Library Session: Scholarly Sources

APRIL 24

- Research/Writing/Individual Appointments

APRIL 26

- Research/Writing/Individual Appointments

APRIL 28:

- Writing/Research/Individual Meetings

MAY 1

- Writing/Research/Individual Meetings

MAY 3, 5, 8, & 10: PRESENTATIONS

MAY 12: WRAP-UP