HIST 138: The History of Muslim Societies to 1500
Fall 2009

Instructor: Ahmed El Shamsy (elshamsy@email.unc.edu; Hamilton 414; 962-3970)
Teaching assistant: Laura Sims (ljssims@email.unc.edu; Hamilton 463)
Lectures: Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:00-12:50 pm, Gardner 08
Recitation sections: Fridays, 9:00-9:50, 10:00-10:50 (Alumni 205), 12:00-12:50 (Gardner 01)
El Shamsy office hours: Wednesdays, 1:30-3:30 pm, and by appointment
Sims office hours: Mondays, 1:00-2:00 pm

Course description:

The area of the world that, at one point or another, found itself under Muslim rule stretches from the Atlantic in the east to the Pacific in the west, and from the Volga in the north to the Sahara in the south. Some regions within this area formed part of the great Muslim empires that spread out from the heartlands of the Middle East through conquest; others entered the Islamic realm gradually through conversions triggered by trade and travel. Today, Islam represents the second or third largest religion in Europe and North America, and recent decades have witnessed the growth of Muslim cultures and identities that are specific to these places. The term “Muslim societies,” then, encompasses a wide diversity of geographical, cultural, and historical forms. The principal aim of this course is to introduce you to this diversity by sampling the history of the various regions that have shaped and been shaped by the religion of Islam and its adherents in the pre-modern period. The course weaves together political and cultural history to illustrate the complex interconnections between different aspects of society, and to highlight the commonalities and continuities that have defined the Muslim world in spite of its fragmentation and heterogeneity.

The course is divided into two main parts. The first part consists of a broad historical overview of the Muslim world, beginning with the emergence of Islam in the seventh-century Arabia and spanning the great conquests and caliphates of Islamic history up to the rise of the gunpowder empires in the late Middle Ages. Our tour also incorporates regions such as India and Spain that, in spite of their geographical marginality, nonetheless had a significant impact on the trajectory of Islamic civilization. In the second part, selected themes that underpin the historical narrative are subjected to closer examination. Topics discussed include the role of women, social movements, and religious minorities, as well as Islamic scholarship, art and literature. In conclusion, we will consider some important historiographical theses regarding the nature of Islam and Muslim societies. Is it accurate to conceptualize the history of the past millennium and a half as a perennial clash of competing civilizations –“Islamic” versus “Western”? And does it make sense to speak of a unitary Islamic civilization in the first place?

Materials:

Timelines, maps, and summaries are provided through the first part of the course to assist you in maintaining an overview of material covered. For most topics, the required reading includes one or more texts from historical sources in addition to a selection from secondary literature. The required books for this course, available at Student Stores, are the following:


• Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971) [an anthropologist’s analysis of the nature and historical evolution of two very different Muslim societies]

All other readings are available in electronic form on Blackboard.

**Assessment:**

1. **Discussion participation and assignments: 30%**. Productive class participation consists of informed and respectful contributions to discussion that demonstrate a critical appreciation of readings, lectures, and the contributions of fellow students. Therefore, it is important that you complete each week’s readings before the recitation section, and that you come to class prepared for the weekly assignments.

2. **Essay: 20%**. The topic of this essay is selected from a list of alternatives provided by the instructor. The essay offers an opportunity to engage in depth with a subject that has aroused particular interest. The emphasis is on the construction of a sound scholarly argument and the effective analysis and presentation of evidence gathered from lectures, course texts, discussion, and optional further reading. The length of the essay should be 1,500-2,000 words, approximately five double-spaced pages.

3. **In-class quiz: 20%**. This takes place at the end of the first part of the course, and tests basic knowledge of historical events, personalities, and geography. The 45-minute quiz is designed to ensure that you possess a sufficient factual basis, without which a meaningful discussion of the historical development of Muslim societies is impossible.

4. **Book review: 10%**. For this assignment, you may select any book (beyond the required course books) that deals with Islamic societies, including a work of fiction. The task of the review is not merely to provide a summary or assessment of the book, but also to relate explicitly its central arguments, assumptions, events, etc. to material covered in the course. The review should address questions such as: What new light do the arguments of the book shed on a historical person or event discussed during the semester? How does your knowledge of the historical record influence your reading of a story? What does the text reveal about the agenda of its author? The review should not exceed two pages.

5. **Final examination: 20%**. The final exam is scheduled for Wednesday, Dec 16, at 12:00 pm. The exam consists of an essay on one topic chosen from a list of alternatives provided by the instructor in advance of the examination date.
Important note: All of your academic work for this course is governed by the Honor Code of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All examinations, essays, and other assignments submitted by you must be done by you, except where collaboration is explicitly permitted. Plagiarism is not condoned, and will result in sanctions. The Honor Code defines plagiarism as the “deliberate or reckless representation of another’s words, thoughts, or ideas as one’s own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise.” So, for example, copying and pasting a passage of text from Wikipedia into your essay with minor modifications counts as plagiarism (as well as using a questionable source), as does “borrowing” a good argument you read in someone’s unpublished paper and using it in yours without proper attribution. For more information on the Honor System, see http://honor.unc.edu.

Course outline:
(NB. This is subject to revision; check Blackboard periodically for updates)

Part I. The historical framework

Week 1 (Aug 26-28). Introduction: What and where is a Muslim society?

Fri 8/28 Visit to the Ackland Art Museum’s special study gallery of Islamic art

Week 2 (Aug 31-Sept 4). The world before Islam

The Great Powers of the seventh century: Byzantium and Sassanid Persia. The religious climate and tribal culture of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Secondary reading: Hodgson, 1:103-145; Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, 285-294; Martin Lings, Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources, 1-32

Week 3 (Sept 9-11). The birth of Islam

Mon 9/7 NO CLASS (Labor Day)

The emergence of a new religion in Mecca. Conversion, persecution, and conflict.

Primary reading: Passages from the Quran (Michael Sells, trans., Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations), 5-28, 68-73, 86-91
Secondary reading: Lings, Muhammad, 33-122

Week 4 (Sept 14-18). The early Muslim community

Muhammad’s emigration to Medina (hijra). The establishment and governance of the first Muslim polity: questions of authority, legitimacy, and leadership. The Muslim state after Muhammad’s death.

Primary reading: The Constitution of Medina; Muhammad’s last sermon; Abu Bakr’s accession speech
**Week 5 (Sept 21-25). Empires and caliphates**

The era of the great Arab conquests, and the spread and fragmentation of the Islamic empire. The Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Baghdad the metropolis. The balance of power between religion and the state.

**Primary reading:** Lewis, 69-87, 199-206, 210-216; treaties between Muslims and conquered peoples (in Lewis, *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, Vol. 1, 228-237 [on Blackboard])

**Secondary reading:** Hodgson, 1:217-230, 1:272-312

**Week 6 (Sept 28-Oct 2). Beyond the caliphate: Islam in India, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa**

*Mon 9/28 ESSAY DUE IN CLASS*

Trade and Sufi brotherhoods as vehicles for the spread of Islam. Muslim-Hindu relations in the Middle Ages. The emergence of “indigenous Islams.”

**Primary reading:** Excerpts from Muhammad al-Biruni, *Alberuni’s India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws, and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*; Lewis, 82-87, 109-121

**Secondary reading:** Bruce B. Lawrence, “The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship: Islam in South and Southeast Asia” (in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito); Nehemia Levtzion, “Islam in Africa to 1800: Merchants, Chiefs, and Saints” (in *The Oxford History of Islam*)

**Week 7 (Oct 5-9). Muslim Spain**

The rapid Muslim conquest of Spain, and the slow Reconquista. The thriving intellectual and cultural life of al-Andalus.

*Wed 11/7 In-class viewing of PBS documentary Islam: Empire of Faith*


**Secondary reading:** Ambroxio Miranda, “The Iberian Peninsula and Sicily” (in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. P. M. Holt et al.), 406-432

**Week 8 (Oct 14-16). The Crusades and the Mongol invasion**

*Mon 10/12 NO CLASS (University Day)*

External threats to the empire from the East and West. Muslims’ perceptions of Europeans and Mongols. The profound impact of the Mongol attack. The emergence of the praetorian state: the Mamluks.

**Primary reading:** Usama b. Munqidh’s memoirs (in Francesco Gabrieli, *Arab Historians of the Crusades*); accounts of the Mongols and the Mamluks (in Lewis, Vol. 1, 77-100 [on Blackboard])
Week 9 (Oct 19-21). The great gunpowder empires: Ottomans and Safavids

*Fri 10/23* NO CLASS (Fall Break)

The rise of the “men from the margins” and the forging of an Ottoman state. Ottoman institutions: Harem, Janissaries, Shari’a vs. imperial law. The transformation of the Safavids from sect to Shi’ite dynasty.

**Primary reading:** the story of “Osman’s Dream”; excerpts from Busbecq’s “Turkish letters”; passage on drugs in Katip Celebi, *The Balance of Truth*, 50-64

**Secondary reading:** Ira Lapidus, “Sultanates and Gunpowder Empires: The Middle East” (in *The Oxford History of Islam*), 363-390; Hodgson, 2:271-279, 2:532-574

Part II. Selected themes

Week 10 (Oct 26-30). Social movements

*Mon 10/26* IN-CLASS QUIZ ON PART I

Mystics, guilds, and youth gangs in Muslim societies. The relationship of social movements and the state.


**Secondary reading:** Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 162-180; Hodgson, 2:201-254

Week 11 (Nov 2-6). Women and gender

The contested role of women in Islamic societies: idealized discourses, legal rules, and practical and economic realities. The private versus the public in Islamic culture. The history of the veil.

**Primary reading:** Passages from the Quran and Hadith; excerpt from Ibn Ajiba, *Autobiography of a Moroccan Sufi*; Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik*, 33-65, 165-174

**Secondary reading:** Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, 102-168

Week 12 (Nov 9-13). Non-Muslims

The concept of “the people of the book.” The social and economic conditions of non-Muslims under Muslim rule.

**Primary reading:** Moses Maimonides, “A Day in the Life of Maimonides”; Dhimma contract from Muhammad al-Shafi’i, *al-Umm* (in *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature*, ed. Norman Calder et al., 90-93)

**Secondary reading:** Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plurality Society*, 1-34
Week 13 (Nov 16-20). Scholarship and learning

The formation and role of the scholarly class (*ulema*). Islamic education: institutions, etiquette, curriculum. Three case studies in Islamic scholarship: Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and al-Ghazali (Algazel).


Week 14 (Nov 23). Art and literature

*Mon 11/23* BOOK REVIEW DUE IN CLASS
*Wed 11/25, Fri 11/27* NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

Islamic precepts regarding the visual arts. The “Islamic arts”: poetry, calligraphy, recitation, miniature painting, architecture. Popular motifs and regional traditions.

In class on Monday: Slide show of Islamic art and architecture from Spain to the Far East; audio recordings of Quranic recitation and of al-Busiri’s 14th-century devotional poem *al-Burda*

Week 15 (Nov 30-Dec 4). Interpreting Islamic history

The thesis of a distinct Islamic civilization, and its historical relationship to the West.


Week 16 (Dec 7-9). Muslim societies: Unity and difference

*Wed 12/9* LAST DAY OF CLASS

Conclusions: revisiting the concept of the “Muslim world.”

**Reading:** Hodgson, 1:79-99; Geertz, 1-89 [Please complete both readings by Monday, 12/7]

**Final examination:** Wednesday, December 16, 12:00 pm