

REL 333/NES 333
Interpreting the Qur'an: Text, Context, and Materiality
Spring 2019, Princeton University, Department of Religion

Instructor: Tehseen Thaver
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Office Hours: Wednesday, 12-2pm

Course Description:

This course will involve a close reading of the Qur'anic text and a comparison of different translations. During this interaction between the students and the "Qur'an-as-text," we will study the history of its compilation, major themes, and literary aspects. This course will also go beyond approaching scripture as a bounded, collected, literary text, by examining the ritual, experiential and material encounters between the Qur'an and Muslim communities. How does the Qur'an operate within societies and what are its multiple functions? How are the controversial verses often associated with the Qur'an interpreted? How do modern understandings of "scripture," "sacrality," "text," and "meaning" determine, dominate, and perhaps limit the way we engage with premodern sacred material? These are some of the questions that we will address in this class. After this course students will have acquired a close familiarity with the Qur'anic text as well as its "social life." In addition, through a critical engagement with categories like "scripture," and "interpretation" students will be introduced to larger debates on hermeneutics and material culture within the study of religion.

Prerequisites:

None. This course assumes no previous knowledge of the subject.

Course Objectives:

After the successful completion of this course, students should:

- Develop an intimate familiarity with the Qur'an, its history, use, and interpretation through engagement with multiple knowledge traditions and historical narratives.
- Cultivate a habit of reading texts closely and attentively.
- Demonstrate a working knowledge of the major methodological and theoretical issues relating to the academic study of religion in general and to the study of the Qur'an in particular.
- Evince their familiarity with the most important categories of scholarship involved in the study of Islamicate cultures and civilizations both past and present.
- Interrogate with confidence the major conceptual problems attached to the study of the Qur'an in the Euro- American academy.

-Analyze and use efficiently a variety of reference materials and genres of scholarly work relevant to the study of the Qur'an including literary sources, concordances, and theological, philosophical and interpretive works.

-Develop a sobering attitude of humility with regards to making sense of the staggering diversity of thought and practice found in the study of Islam and the Qur'an.

-Harness a keen sensitivity for the importance of employing sophisticated and precise phraseology while articulating thoughts and ideas in Religion Studies, in both writing and speech.

Attendance and Class Participation:

Students are expected to attend class regularly and complete all assigned readings in advance. An absence will only be granted in the case of an emergency/extraordinary circumstance verified by the appropriate office on-campus. You are **highly encouraged** to come to class five minutes early because I will start class exactly on time. Coming to class more than 10 minutes late will count as an absence. I will take attendance at the beginning of each class.

In terms of participation, student contributions to class discussions should demonstrate their familiarity with the content and arguments found in the assigned readings. Students will be evaluated on the quality and depth of their contributions, and on their ability to engage critically with the thoughts and ideas of their peers. **I may also assign students to prompt and lead class discussion during the course of the semester that will also be counted in the participation grade. Another key component of class participation is work in group discussions.** Students must contribute vigorously to group discussions and actively engage with the views of their peers. Passivity in group discussions will negatively impact your participation grade.

Exams:

There will be two exams in this class, a mid-term and a final. These will consist of term identification, short answer, and essay questions that I will provide you in advance. The exam will be based on class readings and lectures.

Responses to Readings:

The response will be due on blackboard Monday 9pm before every Tuesday due date. The response will consist of 2 components: 1) a 600-word (NOT MORE) response to a question (or set of questions) connected to the ongoing readings; I will email you the question(s) to be answered 2) 3 New Terms/Concepts that you learnt from the readings with a succinct definition/description for each of those terms (Note: These 3 terms should be new concepts and categories you have learnt that relate to religion and Islam; these are NOT supposed to be new English vocabulary words from the readings). Late responses will not be accepted. Also, there will be no opportunity for make-up responses. If you miss a response, you miss it and will get no credit for it.

Grading Criteria for Responses:

Grading for the responses will be a check +, check, or check - (unacceptable, does not count). **The 20% grade for weekly responses is in your hands.** This means that the total number of "check" and "check plus" responses will earn you the grade as per below:

6 posts – A grade
5- posts – B+ grade
4 posts – B- grade
3 posts – C grade
2 posts – D - grade
1 posts – F grade

Response Grading Rubric: A **check plus (+)** counts as 10/10, a **check** as 9.4/10 and a **check minus (-)** as 7.3/10. If you receive a check minus, you have the option of resubmitting the response the following week for a better grade. But remember, there will be NO opportunity for re-submission if you do not submit a response. For the response component of your grade, 94% and above will count as an A, 90-93% A- and so on. So if you do all your responses and receive a check or check plus on each response, you receive an A for this component of the course. Here is how the responses will be graded: Check plus (+): An outstanding response that is impeccably written, that clearly addresses the questions, that shows an excellent grasp over the reading, and that is carefully analyzed, Check: An entirely satisfactory response that is well-written and that shows a good grasp over the reading, Check minus (-): A careless piece of writing that does not meet the minimum standards for a satisfactory response.

Objective of the Responses:

This assignment is meant to guide you in your readings and to help you maintain an intellectual journal as the course progresses. When I return these responses to you, **please collect them in a binder so you may refer to them anytime.** These will be extremely useful to you in preparing for exams and in keeping track of the material covered. I would also highly recommend that you memorize the 3 new terms that you list on each of your responses. Gradually, you will develop a robust vocabulary of terms in the study of Islam that in turn will boost your confidence in engaging with this tradition.

Final Paper:

You will be required to write a final paper (10 pages) due at the end of the semester. The objective of this paper is to conduct a rhetorical analysis of a chapter or sections of a single chapter from the Qur'an as a way to interrogate its key literary features, context, and traditions of interpretation. More detailed instructions on what is expected from this paper will be provided later on a separate document.

The Importance of Close Reading:

Perhaps the most critical skill that you must employ to do well in this class is the close and attentive reading of texts. **SKIMMING IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED IN THIS CLASS!** You must read closely every word and line of assigned readings. For almost all readings, I will send you some questions in advance that you should pay attention to while reading and that you should be prepared to address in class. But in general, when you read any text for this class, pay close attention to questions of the following sort:

1) what is the point/argument of what I am reading, 2) what are the key moments/passages in the text where the main arguments are articulated, 3) How and through what kinds of evidence does the

author construct her argument, 4) Are there any ambiguities and problems with the arguments of the author, 5) How does this reading relate to/build on/differ from previous readings, 6) And perhaps most importantly, how did this reading advance my knowledge of the Qur'an as an ongoing discursive tradition; the central objective of this class. **After having read the assigned texts closely and in-depth, you should come to class brimming with intellectual excitement, raring to share your thoughts, views, and questions with your peers.**

Films as Texts:

Periodically we will be watching films in class on the specific theme under discussion. These movies have been carefully selected to enable discussion, provoke thought, and visualize course content. You **MUST NOT** approach the viewing of films in class as moments of recreation or relaxation. I expect you to take active notes while watching the films, to be prepared to discuss the films in class, and to think carefully about the key arguments of the film. In other words, you must approach films as texts with content, evidence, and argument that are to be analyzed and critically engaged.

Grading Scheme:

Your grades will be computed as follows:

Attendance and Class Participation: 20%

Responses: 20%

Recitation Assignment: 5%

Mid-Term Exam: 15%

Final Exam: 15%

Final Paper: 25%

Books for Purchase:

- 1) *How to Read the Qur'an*, Carl Ernst, University of North Carolina Press 2013
- 2) *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Heinemann 1972
- 3) *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Aysha A. Hidayatullah, Oxford University Press 2014
- 4) *The Qur'an*, A.J. Droge, *A New Annotated Translation*, Equinox Publishing, 2012
- 5) *The Qur'an* by Abdel Haleem, Oxford University Press, 2008

References:

Available through the Princeton library website:

- 1) *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane McAuliffe
(<https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran>)
- 2) Hanna E. A Kassis, *Concordance of the Qur'an*, (Berkeley, 1982)
Hard copy available and accessible online through oxford.islamicstudies.com
- 3) *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel & W.P. Heinrichs, 2nd Edition
(<https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2>)

Laptop Policy:

The use of laptops is NOT permitted in this class. Using all other electronic items (such as cell-phones) during class is also strictly prohibited.

Important Deadlines:

Responses: 02/12; 02/26; 03/05; 04/02; 04/16; 04/30

March 14th – Midterm in class

April 18th – Recitation Assignment due on course website

May 14th – Before 4:30pm, final papers due in my mailbox, 1879 Hall

Exam week – Final exam

Reading Schedule:

Thinking the Question of Religion and Islam

Tues 02/05 Introductions

Scripture, Book, Kitab

Thurs 02/07 Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, pp. 1-31
Haleem, Sura 'Alaq 96

Muhammad

Tues 02/12 Driss Chraïbi, *Muhammad: A Novel*
Ma' mar ibn Rāshid, *The Expeditions*, tr. S. Anthony, 9-12
Response #1 due

Themes in the Qur'an; Early Meccan Revelations

Thurs 02/14 Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an*, pp. 1-20; 76-105
Read Suras 80, 74
Read 3:1-10; 15:6; 21:5; 37:36; 44:14; 51:39; 52:29-30

Revelation, Inspiration

Tues 02/19 53:1-17, 96
Qur'anic Verses 2:30-39, 7:11-36; Surah 35.

Eschatology in the Qur'an

Thurs 02/21 Read: Suras 69, 70, 99, 101
Angelika Neurwirth, "Paradise as a Qur'anic Discourse" in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, pp. 67-92

Tues 02/26 Ernst, *How to Read the Qur'an*, pp. 20-51
Visit to Rare Books Library; Visual worksheet
Response #2 due

The Prophetic Pattern

Thurs 02/28 Read: Sura 54 (The Moon), 12 (Joseph),
Waldman “New Approaches to Biblical Materials in the Qur’an”, pp. 1-13

Medinan Chapters

Tues 03/05 Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an*, pp 171-90
Haleem, Sura 3
Response #3 due

Thurs 03/07 Ernst, *How to Read the Qur’an*, pp 190-204
Haleem, Sura 5

Tues 03/12 ***Koran by Heart***

Thurs 03/14 **Midterm in class**

Interpreting the Word of God: Qur’anic Hermeneutics

Tues 03/26 Kecia Ali, “Destabilizing Gender, Reproducing Maternity: Mary in the Qur’an” in
Journal of the Qur’anic Studies Association, pp. 89-109
Haleem, Sura 19, 3:33-51

Thurs 03/28 Aisha Hidayatullah, *Feminist edges of the Qur’an*, Introduction, pp 1-19; pp. 65-125

****Mon 04/01 Guest Lecture by Professor Ali-Karjoo Ravary, 4:30pm*******

Qur’an, Gender, Sexuality

Tues 04/02 Aisha Hidayatullah, *Feminist edges of the Qur’an*, and pp 146-177
Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, Introduction (pp. 1-15), chapter 2 (pp. 33-53)
Response #4 due

Thurs 04/04 *The Study Qur’an: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, ed. selections.
Art of the Qur’an, ed. selections.

Prayer, Performance and Charismatic Aspects of the Qur’an

Tues 04/09 *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane

Thurs 04/11 Rudolph Ware, *Walking Qur’an*, introduction, pp. 1-9, 39-76

Tues 04/16 Travis Zadeh, “Fire Cannot Harm it: Mediation, Temptation, and the Charismatic
Power of the Qur’an” in *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, pp. 50-72
“The Sound of the Divine in Daily Life,” Kristina Nelson, in *Everyday Life in the
Muslim Middle East*, pp 257-261.
Response #5 due

Translation and Commentary

- Thurs 04/18 Walid Saleh, “Qur’anic Commentaries” in *The Study Qur’an* pp. 1645-59
Recitation Assignment due
- Tues 04/23 Film in class “Light in Her Eyes”
Thaver and Gruber “Muslims and Manuscripts” Lecture, 6:30pm
- Thurs 04/25 Q 93, 94, 97, 108, 105, 106
Q 102, 107, 111, 104
Q 103, 99, 100, 101, 95
Devin Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’an: Prosody and Structure,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, pp. 101-39
- Tues 04/30 Brett Wilson, “Introduction” in *The Qur’an After Babel: Translating and Bringing the Qur’an in Late Ottoman and Modern Turkey*
SherAli Tareen, “Revolutionary hermeneutics: translating the Qur’an as a manifesto for revolution” in *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*,
Response #6 due
- Thurs 05/02 In class workshop and review

Final Papers due by 4:30pm on Tuesday May 14th in my mailbox, 1879 Hall

Final Exam