

# Women and Islam

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Instructor: Sandy Russell Jones

Office Hours: Tues 2:45- 4pm

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Spring 2012

Tues/Thurs 1:10-2:30pm

Freulinghausen Hall A-6

For centuries, the western world has had an intense fascination with the Muslim woman. Veiled, secluded, living in a harem and sharing her husband with other wives, she has been an object of Western curiosity, academic study, and most recently, the well-intentioned Western feminist's desire to save her from her oppressive world. While culture is thought to be partially to blame, most often it is the Islamic religion that is blamed for subjugating women. This is the image we are presented with in the Western media, but does this image match up to reality?

In this course, we will explore the role of women in Islam. The approach of the course is partially historical and partially thematic. We begin in the pre-Islamic Near East and end in the contemporary period, but make stops along the way to focus on women's role in various aspects of the religion such as the Islamic texts, religious narrative, law, and practice. Students will have the opportunity to engage in hermeneutics (the art of interpretation), as well as to do research on a specific aspect of women's status in shari'a in the course of a mock conference project.

## Learning Goals:

Throughout the semester, students will:

- Gain a basic understanding of Islam's core religious beliefs and practices.
- Explore women's role in the religious texts, the ways in which this role has been interpreted by Islamic scholars, and the ways in which this interpretation has changed over time.
- Become familiar with key Muslim women as historical figures, and as archetypes that serve as models of and models for women's gender roles.
- Explore women's status in Islamic institutions.
- Understand the ways in which Muslim women have been affected by historical developments such as colonialism and globalization.

## Required Texts:

### **BOOKS:**

- Leila Ahmed, ***Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate***, ISBN-13: 978-0300055832

- `Abdullah Yusuf `Ali, trans., ***The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an***, Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2006. ISBN-13: 978-1453756614

This English translation of the Qur'an is one of the most consistent with the Arabic text, and also includes extensive commentary offering background on

events referred to in the text and discusses majority opinions on meanings and interpretations.

- Judith Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine*, ISBN-13: 978-0520224742

- Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, ISBN-13 978-0-19-512836-9

**READINGS:** -posted on the class website on SAKAI  
-links to online readings are also on SAKAI  
-handouts

### **Course Requirements and Grading:**

Midterm Exam	30%
Mock conference	20%
(paper – pre-draft & final 10%/ presentation 5%/ audience participation 5%)	
Quiz (April 26)	25%
Participation	15%
Qur'an exercise	5%
Tafsir exercise	5%

### **Mock Conference**

Through the course of this project, students will have the opportunity to engage in original research on contemporary manifestations of women's issues in Islamic law. Each student will sign up for a specific legal issue that pertains to women's status in Islam. The issues are:

#### **1) Minimum age of marriage**

Muslim jurists of the classical age traditionally set the minimum age of marriage at the onset of puberty, a development that could come as early as nine years old. By modern standards, individuals of this age are still very much children, unable to vote, drive a car, or even stay at home by themselves, never mind embark on the life-long journey of marriage or bearing children of their own. How have contemporary jurists or lawmakers dealt with this issue?

#### **2) Polygamy**

While it is a well-known fact that the *shari`a* allows male Muslims to marry more than one wife, the specifics of the terms and the context during which these terms were set are little-understood. What are the origins of this law, and how do contemporary scholars and lawmakers interpret it?

#### **3) Divorce**

Again, Islam is famous for allowing men to divorce their wives by the simple pronouncement of the words, "I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you." What are the legal underpinnings of what seems to be such an arbitrary dissolution of a relationship as serious as marriage? What are some of the other forms of Islamic divorce, and how do they differ by *madhhab*, or school?

What about specifically modern forms, such as divorce by text?

#### 4) Child custody

When it is determined that the marriage has irrevocably failed, how do Muslim jurists or lawmakers determine which spouse deserves custody of the couple's children? Classical formulations have traditionally awarded custody to the mother up to the age of puberty, after which custody reverts to the father. How is this decision handled by contemporary jurists? Do they consider mitigating factors such as the fitness of the parent or the presence of negative influences in the parent's home? What if either parent dies? Does custody then revert to the other parent, or does it revert to the custodial parent's family?

#### 5) Inheritance

It is a little-known fact that Islam is more progressive than Western societies in that it awarded women the right to own and inherit property centuries before women were granted this right in the West. The Qur'an itself qualifies women as full legal persons able to engage in contracts and own property. What are the terms of women's inheritance in Islam? Do these terms differ by madhhab, or school, and how have these terms developed in the contemporary period?

Students will be asked to investigate how contemporary jurists or lawmakers interpret the specific legal problem they have chosen in light of modern circumstances. After researching the topic in general, students will be asked to narrow their focus to one, specific example to write on in a paper of 5 – 7 pages, and to speak on this example at the mock conference.

Students will be graded on the quality of their research, writing, and presentation skills **as well as** their ability to engage with and relate to other students' work, both on their own panel, and in other panels. This engagement will take the form of responding to classmates' questions during their own session **and** the posing of questions to students on other panels. Also, material presented in the mock conference will be covered on the April 26 quiz. Final papers will be due on the day your panel presents.

#### Absence Policy:

Attendance will not be recorded, however, participation during class is worth 15% of the grade. Please keep that in mind.

If you would like to report an absence, please use the online system, which can be found at:

<https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/>

#### Laptop Policy:

Laptop use in the classroom is permitted for **NOTE-TAKING ONLY**. If **you** choose not to pay attention to the material, that is your decision and will only affect your own grade. However, when you watch YouTube and do Facebook on your screen, it distracts the students around you, therefore, your actions are impacting others. This is not fair to your classmates. Non-course related activity will result in dismissal from class.

## Course Schedule

(Please note: this is the first run of the course,  
therefore schedule may periodically be adjusted)

1/19 Syllabus & course introduction

### PRE-ISLAMIC WOMEN & RELIGION

1/24 The Study of Religion / The Myth of Matriarchy  
Prepare: Bachofen; Bamberger (SAKAI)

1/26 Religion in the pre-Islamic Near East  
Prepare: Ahmed Chs 1 & 2

1/31 Religion in pre-Islamic Arabia/ Film clip: *The Message* / **SUBMIT PANEL  
TOPIC CHOICES**  
Prepare: Hoyland; Lecker (SAKAI)

### THE COMING OF ISLAM

2/2 Muhammad's message and women  
Prepare: Ahmed Chs 3 & 4

2/7 Questioning the narrative  
Prepare: al-Fassi (SAKAI)

### THE FOUNDATION OF DISCOURSES – The Interpretive Sciences

2/9 The Abbasids  
Prepare: Ahmed Ch 5

2/14 Women in the Qur'an / In-class exercise  
Prepare: Stowasser Ch 1

### **ONLINE DISCUSSION / QUR'AN ASSIGNMENT DUE**

2/21 The development of Tafsir / In-class exercise  
Prepare: Stowasser Ch 2

### MODEL MUSLIM WOMEN: Historical vs. symbolic

2/23 The Prophet's wives / **TAFSIR ASSIGNMENT DUE**  
Prepare: Stowasser Ch 8

2/28 `A'isha /

Prepare: Spellberg Chs 1, 2, 5

### **SHARI'A AND WOMEN**

- 3/1 The development of Islamic Law  
Prepare: TBD
- 3/6 **MIDTERM**
- 3/8 Online discussion: "The goat ate my homework:" Shafi'i & adultery / **PANEL TOPIC PRE-DRAFT DUE**  
Prepare: Shafi'i ; Cook (SAKAI)
- 3/13 **SPRING BREAK**
- 3/15 **SPRING BREAK**
- 3/20 Muslim women in the courts  
Prepare: Tucker, entire
- 3/22 **MOCK CONFERENCE: Panel on Minimum age of marriage**
- 3/27 **MOCK CONFERENCE: Panel on Polygamy**
- 3/29 **MOCK CONFERENCE: Panel on Divorce**
- 4/3 **MOCK CONFERENCE: Panel on Child custody**
- 4/5 **MOCK CONFERENCE: Panel on Inheritance**

### **MODERN CHALLENGES**

- 4/10 Women interpreting the Qur'an  
Prepare: Wadud, entire ; TBD
- 4/12 Women and the Veil  
Prepare: Ahmed Chs 7 & 8
- 4/17 Film: *Women in Islam: Veiling and Seclusion*  
Prepare: Ahmed Chs 9 & 10

### **ISSUES OF IDENTITY**

- 4/19 Being Muslim in America  
Prepare: TBD
- 4/24 Film: *Arranged* (Please allow extra 10 minutes if you are able)

4/26

QUIZ

☞ ☞ ☞ HAVE A GREAT SUMMER! ☞ ☞ ☞