Course Description
Welcome to Introduction to Islam: Islam in the Liberal Arts! You may think this course title redundant, as you are in a liberal arts college—yet I feel this is a point well-worth overstressing. “Liberal arts” implies above all interconnectivity, and the field of religious studies inherently invites—and demands—that we make connections when studying a religious tradition like Islam. Therefore, we will explore not only what Muslims believe and how Muslims practice their faith, but in order to get a fuller picture of Islam and Islamic culture, we will throw other academic disciplines into the mix: history, geography, literature, women’s studies, and American studies. Indeed, this is the very nature of the discipline called “religious studies.” Our approach will be historical, meaning we will follow the development of Islam chronologically, from pre-Islamic Arabia to modern-day Islam. We will locate early Islam in the Middle East region, amid two other monotheistic traditions (Christianity and Judaism) and myriad cultural influences. We must allow others’ voices to be heard, and this semester we will consciously invite women’s perspectives into our discussion. We will read not only a “text” book that will lay a foundation of knowledge with facts and vocabulary, but we will examine biographies, literature, and Muslims’ most holy text, the Qur’an. We will look at and challenge the messages about Islam that we get from films, newspapers, television, and music. All the while, we will think critically and write critically, using classroom discussions, journal exercises, writing assignments, and group work to push us to a new level of engagement with Islam and the responsibilities of a religious studies scholar.

Course Objectives
1. Place the study of religion and Islam in particular into the context of a liberal arts education, noting how the study of religion connects to other academic fields (and, by extension, how other academic fields connect to the study of religion!).
2. Gain knowledge about the history, geography, and cultures of the Muslim world.
3. Explore the complexities and contradictions inherent in the relationship among Islam, the media, and popular culture.
4. Humanize Muslims by understanding their religious beliefs and practices, by examining their cultural histories, and by allowing them to speak in their own voices.
5. Develop competency in reading multiple kinds of texts, ranging from traditional “text” books to religious texts to academic articles to biographies, poetry, and literature.
6. Gain a greater understanding of those complicated current-events issues involving Islam, Arabs, and the Middle East.

Course Requirements
*Journal (10%)—You are welcome to type your journal entries or handwrite them, so long as you write legibly. I expect you to write at least one typed page or two handwritten pages each week. Use this journal as an opportunity to grapple with the new material, to think through any questions you have, and even to work out ideas for your short essays. From time to time I will give you questions to spur your thinking. I will collect your journal at midterm and at the end of the semester, and grades will be based not only on meeting the weekly length requirement but also on the substance of your responses; as no prior knowledge of Islam is expected for this course, I anticipate that much of this material will be new to you and therefore worth wrestling with!
*2 Short Response Essays (10% each)—Each paper should be 3 pages in length, with 1” margins and 12-point font. Do not confuse these response essays with a journal entry; this paper is to have a clearly stated
thesis, an argument, and a conclusion. Consider the response essays as an opportunity to tackle an issue, text, or theme with greater tenacity. Your first draft will be peer workshopped in class; you will then have a week to make revisions before the final draft is due.

*3 Quizzes (5% each)—This is my opportunity to ensure that you are absorbing facts about Islam, both from readings and lectures. The first of these will be a map quiz covering the region that we are studying. The second and third quizzes will cover key terms, people, and events. I will provide study guides a week before each quiz. Please don’t “cram” for these quizzes—you will find it much easier to learn and absorb this vocabulary if you take time every night for review.

*Group Project (15%)—In groups of 3-4 people, you will select a current political and/or social issue regarding Islam and present your findings to the class. This is your opportunity to work with others and become experts on a topic that you may have heard about in the news but in actuality know very little about. Some ideas include the Sunni/Shi’i conflict in Iraq, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the India/Pakistan conflict, or what the media dubs “Islamic Fundamentalism” and its links to terrorism (e.g. the Taliban, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood). Presentations should last about 20 minutes (or roughly 6 minutes per person in your group). I would like to meet with each group a week or two before the presentations.

*Class Participation (15%)—As with all of your classes, in Introduction to Islam you are expected to come to class prepared and participate in discussions. You are allowed one unexcused absence, thereafter each absence will result in 5% off of your class participation grade. Note, then, that 3 unexcused absences will render your class participation a 0% out of 15%, making it impossible to have a final grade over 85%.

*Final Exam (25%)—As opposed to the quizzes throughout the semester, the final exam will be writing intensive. It will cover historical narratives, the major themes of the course, and allow you to show me what you’ve learned this semester. More information will be forthcoming in the weeks before the final exam.

Expectations for Class
1. Read the materials, making note of unfamiliar words and people.
2. Engage the material, particularly through writing in your journal. This is a mental exercise and a great habit to get into.
3. Bring texts to class! Be prepared to back up any argument you make with a citation from the text.

Required Reading

The prices listed beside the texts are the “New” paperback prices from Amazon.com. All of these texts can also be purchased used for about 1/3 the cost—I would especially recommend buying “used” for the Denny. Other readings will be available through a course reader or Blackboard (denoted “BB” below). All books will be on reserve in the library, and a select few assignments will only be available on reserve.
Course Schedule

Week 1

Thursday: Welcome and Overview. Guided in-class journal entry: What do I (think I) know about Islam and Muslims? What words, ideas, and concepts do I associate with “Islam”? Where do my ideas come from?

Week 2

Tuesday: Setting the Stage for the emergence of Islam. What was happening in this region in the centuries before Islam developed? Where is this region? (hand out sample maps for upcoming map quiz) Why and how can we be more critical of the media? Read Denny Part 1, “Religion and Common Life in the Pre-Islamic Near East,” pgs 3-56. Read Greg Noakes, “Muslims and the American Press,” 361-78 (BB)

Thursday: Background from another perspective. Why is it important to study an alternate perspective, that of women? What surprises you here? Read Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, “Introduction,” “Mesopotamia,” “Mediterranean Middle East,” pgs. 1-37

Week 3


Week 4


Week 5

Tuesday: QUIZ 1 over Weeks 1-4, excluding maps Reading Suras Read Sells, “Selections from the Qur’an with Commentary,” pgs 41-141. (I know this seems like a lot—please read what you can and become very familiar with at least 6 suras for class discussion. Skim and scan what you cannot finish.)

Week 6

Tuesday: Beyond the Text. What are some problems of interpretation (of the Qur’an and Islamic law) that impacted women? How is the Qur’an’s oral nature alive today? Read Ahmed, W&G, part of “Elaboration of the Founding Discourses,” pgs. 88-94. Read Alim H. Samy, “Exploring Transglobal Hip Hop Umma,” pgs. 264-74 (BB)

Thursday: What does it mean to study “religious studies”? How does this tie into the worship practices and creeds of the Muslim community? Read Denny Chapters 9 & 10, “The Prophet’s Sunna as Preserved in the Hadith” and “Muslim Creeds and Theologies,” pgs. 159-194.

Week 7


Week 8

Tuesday: PAPER 1 DUE Sufi Orders and Rumi. What can you find in Rumi’s poems that echo what you now know about Sufism? What are some themes in Rumi’s poetry? Read Denny Chapter 13, “Masters and Disciples: Forms and Functions of Sufi Orders,” pgs. 245-66; pay particular attention to pages 253-7 on Rumi Read at least 10 of Rumi’s poems, http://www.khamush.com/poetry/

Thursday: Ideals and Realities of Islamic Community and day-to-day life. Compare the daily lives of Muslims to that of other cultures, including your own. Read Denny Part 5, “Patters of Islamic Personal and Communal Life,” pgs. 269-317.

Week 9

Thursday: Understanding Islam in the Modern World. Tackling the issue of Fundamentalism. Read Denny Chapter 17, “Three Forms of Islamic Revival,” pgs. 345-66. The class will be divided into three groups for the following reading assignment on “Fundamentalism,” with each group being assigned one of the following readings from Fundamentalisms Observed, which will then be presented to the class. (BB) Read John O. Voll, “Fundamentalism in the Sunni Arab World: Egypt and The Sudan,” pgs. 345-402 or Read Abdulazziz A. Sachedina, “Activist Shi’ism in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon,” Pgs. 403-456 or Read Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia: The Jamaat-i-Islami and the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asia,” pgs. 457-530.

Week 10

Tuesday: QUIZ 2 over weeks 5 through 9 Looking at some of Islam’s tricky modern-day issues, including veiling, feminism, and relations with Judaism. How would you categorize the roots of these problems? Read Ahmed, W&G, “The Discourse of the Veil” and “The First Feminists,” pgs. 144-188. Read Nissim Rejwan, “Islam and Judaism: Cultural Relations and Interaction through the Ages,” pgs. 28-57. (BB)

Thursday: Looking at African-American Islam through the eyes of Malcolm X. What kind of insight do we get from an autobiographical account as opposed to an historical one? What historical information can you glean from this text? Why was Malcolm drawn to Islam? Why might Islam be appealing to African-Americans during this time? Read Malcolm X, Chapters 10-12, “Satan,” “Saved,” and “Savior,” pgs. 154-214 (and start reading for next session, if possible, as the reading load is heavier)

Week 11


Week 12

Tuesday: In-class viewing of 2004 documentary Control Room. If you don’t have a class immediately following the film, consider staying an extra 30 minutes or so for a discussion. I guarantee you will have much to say!
Thursday: **1st DRAFT OF PAPER 2 DUE**
In-class peer workshop.
Exploration of the female Muslim literary voice. How does Ahmed write about the significant social and historical events in her life? What insights do you get from this genre compared to other texts we’ve examined?

Week 13

Tuesday: **PAPER 2 DUE**
Continued exploration of the female Muslim literary voice.
What themes do you find recurring in Ahmed’s memoir? What is the impact of colonialism for the people in Egypt? How does Ahmed’s perspective differ from a “Western” perspective? Note the issue of labeling as it pertains to nationalism and racism. What is the difference between being an Arab and being a Muslim?

Thursday: Group Presentations and discussion

Week 14

Tuesday: Group Presentations and discussion

Thursday: Discussion of *The Kite Runner.*

TBA **FINAL EXAM**