Anthropological Perspectives on Islam and Muslim Societies

Class meeting times: M, W, F 10-10:50 a.m.
Instructor: Bruce Whitehouse
Office hours: Tuesdays 10 a.m. – noon or by appointment
e-mail: Bruce_Whitehouse@brown.edu  phone 863-7284

Course description
Over the last three decades, Islam has come to be seen as a force to be reckoned with on the world stage. This course aims to help students develop an understanding both of Islam and of the ways Muslims’ understandings of their faith are mediated by social, economic, and political phenomena. We will identify and examine some of the shared “fundamentals” of the religion while evaluating how Muslims have interpreted these fundamentals differently in a wide array of geographical, historical, and social contexts. We will also juxtapose primary sources (Islamic texts) with secondary sources (anthropological studies of Muslim societies) and apply social theory to consider the wide variety of sometimes contradictory beliefs and practices which exist across Muslim societies. We will use this juxtaposition to investigate the tension between Islam as a universal faith, on the one hand, and as a source of religious meaning and inspiration to peoples living in specific times and places, on the other. No prior knowledge of or exposure to Islam is required.

Course goals
The course seeks to present students with a sense of how Muslims in various parts of the world understand and practice their religion. At the end of the semester, students should be able to:
• apply a set of analytical tools (including social theory) to analyze events in the Muslim world;
• explain the interaction between constructions of the Muslim faith and specific social forces; and
• participate critically in ongoing public debate about the role of Islam and of Muslim identity in the contemporary world.

Course format
This is a seminar course designed to enable students to play an active role in their own learning experience. Most class sessions will include short instructional presentations by the instructor as well as extended discussion of the assigned readings.

Week 1  Introduction: What is Islam?  A world religion and its local variations
Week 2  Who was Muhammad?  The life of the Prophet
Week 3  The bedrock: Islamic scriptures and their interpretation
Week 4  Constructing orthodoxy: Islamic knowledge and authority
Week 5  Putting principles in practice: Ritual and salāt (prayer)
Week 6  The hajj (pilgrimage)
Week 7  Sufi mysticism
Week 8  Muslim women and ideologies of gender
Week 9  Modernity and reformism
Week 10 Understanding fundamentalism: the rise (and fall?) of political Islam
Week 11 Islam vs. the West
Week 12 Islam in the West
Week 13 Student research presentations
**Student assessment**

Students are expected to read the required texts, to play an active part in regular class discussions, and to complete written/oral assignments in a timely manner. Student performance on assignments will be evaluated with respect to the course goals outlined above (see grading rubric for details). Assignments will be weighted as follows:

- Class attendance & participation: 30% of course grade
- Three short essays: 45% of course grade
- Final research project: 25% of course grade

*Class participation.* Please come to class meetings punctually and prepared. To make for fruitful discussion of the week’s text, please bring to class two written observations or questions which have come to mind from your reading. You’re always encouraged to be critical in your approach to these readings, though it can be useful to look at on the text’s strong points as well as its weaknesses. More than one absence during the semester will adversely affect your grade.

*Short papers.* Write a 3-4pp. critical response to the week’s reading assignment (you may choose to concentrate on one, or compare multiple readings). ANALYZE, DO NOT SUMMARIZE the readings in question. It’s best to focus on a single theme. When choosing this theme, consider these questions: What aspect of this the author’s argument stands out to you, for good or bad? What makes it work, or what makes it fail to work? What strikes you as provocative, unique, or at least unusual about the author’s approach? What larger issue concerning religion, culture, and human society does the text illuminate which transcends the bounds of the study’s social and geographic setting, and what makes this issue important? You can bring outside information (i.e. from other texts or personal experience) to bear, but don’t let it get in the way. The main goal in writing these papers is not for you to recapitulate an author’s viewpoint; it is for you to develop or at least sharpen a set of analytical tools with which you’ll be able to articulate your own viewpoint. The very best papers are those whose writers take a risky, not at all obvious viewpoint, support it with evidence, and make their case clearly. Note that you must submit a short paper about a particular reading on the Friday of the week that reading was assigned, and you must submit at least two of the three papers by the Friday of Week 9.

*Research project.* Students will identify a research question which reflects the themes and objectives of the course, and will write a 12-15 pp. paper on the subject (see “Final research paper: Grading rubric” at end of syllabus). They will also give 10-minute oral presentations of their research to the class at the end of the term.

**Reading assignments**

There are no textbooks for this course; all readings can be found on the course website (http://mycourses.brown.edu). Click on “course content,” then “Readings.”

**Academic honesty**

Students must adhere to the University’s code of academic honesty. The work you do must be your own, and all sources must be properly and fully attributed in written assignments.

**Accommodating disability**

This course seeks to accommodate university students of all learning abilities. Please inform the instructor if you have a disability which requires you to take additional time for written assignments and exams.
Class sessions: topics and readings

Week 1  Introduction: What is Islam? A world religion and its local variations
Islam is both a universal religion, which its adherents tend to see as a single, undifferentiated tradition which remains stable over time and space, and a collection of diverse practices and beliefs linked to the specific populations and locales in which Muslims live. How do anthropologists deal with the tension between universalism and particularism in the study of Islam?

Assigned readings:

Week 2  Who was Muhammad? The life of the Prophet
Muhammad, generally seen as the founder of Islam, was also a man whose personal example has been extremely influential among Muslims for over 14 centuries since his death. What are some of the ways Muslims themselves have found meaning in the story of the Prophet’s life?

Film showing: “The Message” (1976)

Assigned readings:
M  Ramadan, Tariq. 2007. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*. New York: Oxford University Press (chapters 1-5)
W  Ramadan 2007 (chapters 6-10)
F  Ramadan 2007 (chapters 11-16)

Week 3  The bedrock: Islamic scriptures and their interpretation
The Qur’an and the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet) form Islam’s textual foundation, but their interpretation has always been subject to discord. How can we understand the role of the scriptures for Muslims in different societies?

Assigned readings:
W  Qur’an (selections)
Week 4 Constructing orthodoxy: Islamic knowledge and authority
While Muslims stress the direct relationship between the believer and God, from the time of the Prophet the practices and interpretations of ordinary Muslims have been mediated by Islamic scholars and leaders. Who decides what is orthodox under Islam, and how has their power been contested?

Assigned readings:

Week 5 Putting principles in practice: Ritual and salāt (prayer)
It is widely known that ritualized prayer is one of the “Five Pillars” of Islam. How can we apply an anthropological analysis to the practice of salāt and other religious rituals, and what do these rituals mean to Muslims in different settings?

Assigned readings:

Week 6 The hajj (pilgrimage)
Performing the pilgrimage to Mecca is a duty of all Muslims who have the means to do so. What can accounts of the hajj teach us about the dynamic between universalism and particularism in Islam?

Assigned readings:
F Nomani 2005 (chapters 4-6)
Week 7  Sufi mysticism
Sufism is a centuries-old path (or, more accurately, a set of multiple paths) Muslims have followed in the desire to gain closeness to God. What is the significance of Sufi Islam for Muslims today, and how has it evolved over the years?

Assigned readings:
M  Ernst 2003 (ch. 5)
F  Soares 2005 (ch. 4)

Note:  A brief (1-2 pp.) description of the research question for your final project is due on Friday of this week.

Week 8  Muslim women and ideologies of gender
The role of women in Islam has been controversial in the West.  Taking the views of Muslim women themselves into account can help us to transcend the depiction of them as passive recipients, or even prisoners, of their own religious traditions.

Assigned readings:
W  Nomani 2005 (chapters 7-9)

Note:  Two of your three short essays must be submitted no later than Friday of this week.

Week 9  Modernity and reformism in Islam
The modern era and its correlates (the expansion of European industrial capitalism and imperialism around the world, including the Muslim world) have posed major challenges to Muslims’ religious and political projects.  How have Muslims responded to the friction between Western and Islamic traditions?

Assigned readings:
F  Soares 2005 (chapter 7)
Week 10  Understanding fundamentalism: the rise (and fall?) of political Islam
There are many competing theories about what brought about the trend toward Islamic fundamentalism over the last half-century. We consider the origins and future prospects of ideologies which see politics as an inseparable aspect of Islam.

Assigned readings:
W  Roy, Olivier. 1994. The Failure of Political Islam. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (ch. 3); Qutb (pp. 22-39)

Week 11  Islam vs. the West
Given the prevalence of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, which holds that Western and Islamic civilizations are destined to be in a state of permanent conflict with each other, what insights can anthropological analyses offer to discussions of the relations between Muslim societies and the West?

Assigned readings:
W  Gusterson, Hugh. 2005. “The Seven Deadly Sins of Samuel Huntington.” In Why America’s Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back (pp. 24-42)

Week 12  Islam in the West
Europe and North America are becoming home to more and more Muslims. What does the cohabitation of Muslims and non-Muslims in the West mean for the future of secular Western societies, and for the future of Islam?

Assigned readings:
W  Mamdani, Mahmoud. 2002. “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim” American Anthropologist, 194(3): 766-775

Week 13  Student research presentations & evaluations
M  Student presentations
W  Student presentations
F  Wrap-up and evaluations
Final research project: Grading rubric

Students always want to know how to make their research project more anthropological. In addition to its focus on culture, customs, and practices, anthropology is often concerned with meaning. Anthropologists tend to be interested in how members of a given population think about something, how they represent it to themselves and to others, what they say about it, and how what they say about it may differ from what they actually do. Most, but not all, of the time, this is what differentiates us from sociologists, epidemiologists, political scientists, sociobiologists, etc. So one way to make your paper anthropological is to pay attention to questions of meaning in your research. I hasten to add, though, that some anthropologists score a lot of points by arguing that anthropologists’ attention to cultural meaning has in fact distracted us from what’s really important (i.e. political-economic matters), and if, like them, you choose to focus on the “big picture,” that’s okay too. The following grading rubric, therefore, does not include any item explicitly about meaning.

This rubric is meant to give you an idea of how I will evaluate and grade your research paper, which after all will make up 40 percent of your course grade. The first three areas listed below are the most important in determining the paper’s grade, and account for more than half of the 100 total points on the scale. The highest premium lies in defining your research problem well; if you haven’t made it fully clear to me, I will deduct at least five points. Also, note that I will automatically deduct five points for any one of the following errors: pages not stapled; pages not numbered; no title; no name; margins, font, or spacing too small.

If you want to know how I graded your paper in each of the areas below, please staple this sheet to the end of your paper. If not, keep it, and I’ll just write the total score on your paper.

Is your paper’s central theme or research problem well defined? Yes______(20) No______(0-15)

Does the paper show evidence of extensive and careful research? Yes______(20) No______(0-18)

Does the paper use specific and detailed examples to illustrate its points? Yes______(15) No, or not enough______(0-14)

Is discussion organized and clear? Yes______(15) Sometimes not ________(0-14)

Is analysis especially original? Yes______(10) No, or not in comparison with others______(0-8)

Is class lecture and reading content integrated accurately and fully into argument, when possible and relevant? Yes______(10) No/flawed interpretation______(0-8)

Are there few errors in spelling or grammar? Yes______(5) A number of errors______(0)

Is the paper typed, stapled, 15-20 numbered pages, double-spaced, 1” margins, 12-pt. font? Yes______(5) No______(0)

Total _______________ (of 100)