

Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader might be used as a classroom resource in a number of different ways. It can serve as the primary textbook in a course on the Qur'an whose main purpose is to explore themes of interest for modern readers. The idea to write this book first came to me in the Spring semester of 2008 when I taught such a course that was titled "The Qur'an and Contemporary Issues." Alternatively, the book might be used as the main text for a section or module in a course that takes a wider look at a particular subject or set of subjects. The following are some examples of courses in the second category:

- (1) A course on the Qur'an, a section of which treats contemporary issues
- (2) A course on Islam, a section of which treats the Qur'an
- (3) A course on the Bible and the Qur'an, a section of which treats contemporary issues
- (4) A course on contemporary issues in religious texts, a section of which treats the Qur'an

To show how the book might be used in either of these ways I offer here two models, one a complete syllabus covering an entire fourteen-week semester and the other a partial syllabus for a portion of a semester.

I. Fourteen-week semester

If *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader* is used as the primary text during an entire semester approximately two weeks should be spent on each of the seven topics it treats. Every chapter of the book provides an overview of what the Qur'an has to say about the theme it discusses, and so the first two or three class periods of each of the seven modules should be spent reading and discussing the relevant chapter. The rest of the class sessions devoted to the topic could then expand or deepen coverage of it by assigning additional readings from other sources. In the syllabus proposed here a set of readings is recommended for each module, but others might be substituted at the discretion of the instructor.

In all likelihood, most students will have little prior familiarity with the Qur'an. The introductory chapter to *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader* is meant to provide an overview of the contents, study, and use of the Qur'an that will give students sufficient background to begin the course. Other introductory readings could be assigned to further enhance the students' general understanding.

In the following syllabus students are required to write four papers during the semester. These might be assigned during four particular modules, or students might be given the option to write a paper for any four of the seven modules of the course. Four sample writing assignments are included here. Regardless of the format for the assignments, it is recommended that the last session of each module be devoted to general discussion of the topic under consideration and/or brief presentations on the student papers.

Immediately after the headings of most sections in the book a list of Qur'an passages is found. These lists identify all the texts that are mentioned in the section, even if they are not treated specifically in the book. Students should be urged to read all of these passages so that they can gain a fuller sense of what the Qur'an teaches about the topic. Their familiarity with these texts and the contents of the other readings might be monitored through the use of in-class or, as in this syllabus, on-line quizzes.

THE QUR'AN AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Course Description

As the sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an exerts a tremendous amount of influence over the lives of Muslims. At the same time, it is a primary resource for non-Muslims seeking to understand the basis of Muslim practices, beliefs, and attitudes. This course explores what the Qur'an has to say about seven issues of contemporary concern: The Natural Environment, Family Matters, Gender and Sexuality, Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations, *Jihād*, Violence and War, and Death and the Afterlife. Particular attention will be paid to modern interpretations of the relevant texts and their implications for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Required Texts

John Kaltner, *Introducing the Qu'ran for Today's Reader* (Fortress Press, 2011).

The Qur'an, a new translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford University Press, 2004).

All other readings will be distributed via the course Moodle website.

Course Requirements

(1) Attendance and participation

The course will be in a seminar format. All students are expected to complete all readings for the day they are assigned and come to class prepared to discuss them. More than four unexcused absences will adversely affect one's grade. **Attendance and participation will account for 20% of your final grade.**

(2) On-line quizzes

There will be an on-line quiz for each class period. This is a series of questions related to the day's reading that must be completed prior to the class meeting. The course has a Moodle website where the quizzes and other information can be found. **On-line quizzes will account for 20% of your final grade.**

(3) Writing assignments

There will be four writing assignments during the semester. Details on these assignments will be discussed in class. **Each writing assignment will be worth 10%, with the total accounting for 40% of your final grade.**

(4) Exam

There will be a final exam that will be taken during finals week. **The final exam will account for 20% of your final grade.**

Weeks 1 and 2 – Introduction to the Qur'an/The Natural Environment

Kaltner, Introduction and Chapter 1

Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti, “*Fītra: An Islamic Model for Humans and the Environment*,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003), 67-82.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003), 85-105.

Ibrahim Özdemir, “Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003), 3-37.

Lutfi Radwan, “The Environment from a Muslim Perspective,” in *Abraham’s Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, ed. Norman Solomon, Richard Harries and Tim Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 272-83.

General Discussion/Student Papers

Weeks 3 and 4 – Family Matters

Kaltner, Chapter 2

Zainab Alwani, “The Qur’anic Model for Harmony in Family Relations,” in *Change from Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities*, ed. Maha B. Alkhateeb and Salma Elkadi Abugideiri (Peaceful Families Project, 2007), 33-65.

Azizah Y. al-Hibri, “The Nature of the Islamic Marriage: Sacramental, Covenantal, or Contractual?” in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 182-215.

Richard C. Martin, “Marriage, Love, and Sexuality in Islam: An Overview of Genres and Themes,” in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 217-38.

Khaleel Mohammed, “Sex, Sexuality, and the Family,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Chichester: Blackwell, 2006), 298-307.

General Discussion/Student Papers

Weeks 5 and 6 – Gender and Sexuality

Kaltner, Chapter 3

Excerpts from Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).

Excerpts from Asma Barlas, *“Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Excerpts from Scott Siraj al-Haq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010).

Tim Winter, “Gender from an Islamic Perspective,” in *Abraham’s Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, ed. Norman Solomon, Richard Harries and Tim Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 236-43.

General Discussion/Student Papers

Weeks 7 and 8 – Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations

Kaltner, Chapter 4

Asma Afsaruddin, “Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur’anic Perspectives,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42, no.3 (2007): 389-406.

Mahmut Aydin , “Religious Pluralism: A Challenge for Muslims—A Theological Evaluation,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38, no.2-3 (2001): 330-52.

Mahmoud Ayoub, “Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur’ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 8, no.2 (1997): 145-64.

Excerpts from Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

General Discussion/Student Papers

Weeks 9 and 10 – Jihād

Kaltner, Chapter 5

Excerpts from Richard Bonney, *Jihād: From Qur’ān to bin Laden* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

J. Harold Ellens, “Jihad in the Qur’an, Then and Now,” in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 3, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 39-52.

Rosalind W. Gwynne, “Usama bin Ladin, the Qur’an and Jihad,” *Religion* 36 (2006): 61-90.

Excerpts from Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1996).

General Discussion/Students Papers

Weeks 11 and 12 – War and Violence

Kaltner, Chapter 6

Excerpts from Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Excerpts from John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Abduljalil Sajid, “Qur’anic Text and Violence,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 20, no.2 (2006): 33-49.

Seif I. Tag El-Din, “War, Peace and the Islamic State from the Qur’anic Perspective: Some Critical Observations,” *Encounters* 9, no.2 (2003): 153-70.

General Discussion/Student Papers

Weeks 13 and 14 – Death and the Afterlife

Kaltner, Chapter 7

Jonathan Brockopp, “Islam,” in *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 60-78.

Muhammad Abdel Haleem, “Life and Beyond in the Qur’an,” in *Beyond Death: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life after Death*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Christopher Lewis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 66-79.

Excerpts from Nerina Mustomji, *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

Excerpts from Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

General Discussion/Student Papers

FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT

For this paper I am asking you to choose one of the following three options:

1) Blog/Discussion Group Analysis

Choose two or three blogs or on-line discussion groups related to gender in Islam, and study their contents from the perspective of chapter 3 in the book *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader*. You may choose to remain an outside observer, or you may participate by contributing or posting to the sites. Your paper must be an analysis of what you find on the sites, not simply a report on their contents. How do they compare/contrast with the views and methods reflected in the chapter? In light of the chapter's contents how would you (or did you) respond to the way a particular issue or theme is being addressed on-line? Please include a brief description of each group's or founder's mission or purpose.

2) Article Critique

Read the article on Moodle by Mohamed Mahmoud titled "To Beat or Not to Beat," and critique it from the perspective of chapter 3 of the book *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader*. In light of the chapter's contents what do you think of the author's method and conclusions? Where are the points of agreement and disagreement between Mahmoud and the chapter?

3) Study of a Topic or Issue

Choose a topic or issue that is discussed in chapter 3 of the book *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader* and explore it in more detail by reading other sources that treat it. Compare these sources to the chapter's treatment, and discuss the similarities and differences among them. You should read at least three other authors' analysis of the topic/issue. If you choose this option, please consult me about the sources you will use prior to writing your paper.

Your paper is due in class on _____. No late papers will be accepted. It should be five double-spaced pages in length with one-inch margins. Please avoid lengthy quotations from the readings. There is no need to use footnotes. Simply identify sources by indicating the author and page number(s) in parentheses, and include a bibliography of works cited at the end of the paper. The URLs of web sites should also be included in the bibliography if you choose the first option. Each of the options requires in-depth discussion of chapter 3 of *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader*, so please make sure this is present. Your paper will be graded for content, style, grammar, and organization. This assignment is worth 10% of your final grade.

SECOND WRITING ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is a paper you will write that discusses “A Common Word,” a document written by Muslim leaders in October, 2007 that was directed to Christian leaders. The material you will need to read and refer to can all be found at this web site: www.acommonword.com. You should begin by reading the information on the web site’s homepage, which will give you some background information on “A Common Word.” After you have read this, you should read the document itself. It’s found at the “A Common Word” link on the left side of the page, but I suggest you access and print out the PDF file in English at the link on the left titled “Downloads and Translations.” There are also links to “Christian Responses” and “Jewish Responses” to “A Common Word.” You’ll note that there are many more Christian responses than Jewish ones, undoubtedly because Christians were the target audience of the document. I’d like you to read through four or five of these responses (or more if you’d like) to get a feel for how the document has been received. After you’ve read all this, you’ll be prepared to write your paper.

Your paper will discuss how the authors use the Qur’an throughout “A Common Word,” and then you’ll offer some personal comments on your reaction to the document and its usefulness for interfaith relations. You should devote more or less equal amounts of the paper to these two parts. In the first part, please evaluate the authors’ use of the Qur’an. Do the Qur’an texts help to support their position, or are there flaws? Do you identify any problems with the way the Qur’an is being cited and interpreted? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the authors’ method? You’ll note that the authors also cite and discuss biblical texts in the latter part of the document. You may offer some comments on these as well, but your primary focus should be on the Qur’an. In the second part of the paper I’d like you to give your personal reaction to “A Common Word.” Can it be a useful resource for interfaith dialogue? How effective do you think it has been or will be in improving relations between Muslims and Christians? Does it adopt or encourage a pluralistic view of religion? In this second part you should refer to and converse with comments and ideas you find in the “Christian Responses” and “Jewish Responses” sections of the web site.

Your paper is due in class on _____. Late papers will be penalized. It should be five double-spaced pages in length with one-inch margins. Please avoid lengthy quotations from the readings. Your paper will be graded for content, style, grammar, and organization. This assignment is worth 10% of your final grade.

THIRD WRITING ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is a paper you will write that treats a reading we have not discussed in class. It can be found in the “Writing Assignments” section on the Moodle page, where it is labeled “Richardson Reading.” It contains the first three chapters of a book written by Don Richardson titled *Secrets of the Koran*.

After you read this material I’d like you to write a paper that discusses Richardson’s view of the Qur’an and its contents. You should focus on his position on violence and war in the text, so his third chapter (“Violent Verses, Violent Deeds”) will be most relevant for you. You may refer to other parts of the reading as well, but be sure to focus your attention on the third chapter.

Your paper should be comprised of two parts. In the first part, compare and contrast Richardson’s view with that of one or two of the other readings we have discussed in class. How is he unique and/or similar to what we have seen in other readings? Be sure to clearly identify the methods and agendas of each reading you treat. In the second part of the paper, identify one reading that has been particularly influential in shaping your opinion about the presence of violent passages in the Qur’an. This can be a reading or view you agree with or disagree with. Explain why you have made this particular choice, and present a clear articulation of your view of how violent texts should be understood or interpreted.

Your paper is due in class on _____. No late papers will be accepted. It should be five double-spaced pages in length with one-inch margins. Please avoid lengthy quotations from the readings. There is no need to use footnotes. Simply identify sources by indicating the author and page number in parentheses. You should spend three pages on the first part outlined above and two pages on the second part. Your paper will be graded for content, style, grammar, and organization. This assignment is worth 10% of your final grade.

FOURTH WRITING ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is a paper you will write that discusses human rights in Islam, a topic we have not treated explicitly in class. The “Writing Assignments” section of the Moodle site contains the two articles you must read to do this assignment. One is “Human Rights in the Qur’anic Perspective,” written by Riffat Hassan, and the other is “Human Rights in Islam,” by Mahmud Gamal-ad-din.

After you read this material I’d like you to write a paper that discusses how the authors use the Qur’an to make their arguments about human rights in Islam. The articles refer to and quote particular Qur’an passages frequently, but keep in mind that you will also probably need to read the surrounding text to get a fuller sense of the passages’ meanings. In addition, you’ll note that the Gamal-ad-din article refers to the Qur’an chapters by title rather than number, so you’ll have to use the table of contents in our Qur’an to know which chapters to consult.

Your paper should be comprised of two main parts, each devoted to one of the articles. In each part, please evaluate the author’s use of the Qur’an. Do the Qur’an texts help to support the author’s position, or are there flaws with the interpretation? Do you identify any problems with the way the Qur’an is being cited and interpreted? What are the strengths of the author’s method? Be sure to refer to specific passages and aspects of the articles, but avoid quoting extensively from them. You should also put each article in conversation with one other reading or author we’ve treated earlier this semester. Explain how what Hassan and Gamal-ad-din are doing is either similar to or different from what the previous reading did. For example, it might be that you think Gamal-ad-din uses the Qur’an in a way similar to what Reuven Firestone does in his treatment of jihad. Explain how this is so. Each of these two parts should be two pages in length. On a final page, I’d like you to state whether you think Hassan or Gamal ad-din does a better job of using the Qur’an to discuss human rights in Islam. Please explain your choice with specific reasons.

Your paper is due in class on _____. No late papers will be accepted. It should be five double-spaced pages in length with one-inch margins. Please avoid lengthy quotations from the readings. There is no need to use footnotes. Simply identify sources by indicating the author and page number in parentheses. Your paper will be graded for content, style, grammar, and organization. This assignment is worth 10% of your final grade.

II. A portion of a semester

Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader could be used as the main text for a section of a course that takes a wider look at a particular subject or set of subjects. If it is used in this way the introduction to the book and its seven chapters could each be covered in one or two class sessions, depending on how much of the semester is spent using the book. If more than one class period can be devoted to each chapter, the following arrangement could be adopted to cover a sixteen-session portion of a semester.

As with the full-semester format, regular in-class or on-line quizzes should be implemented to make sure students are doing and understanding the readings. In addition, a paper or comprehensive essay would be an effective way of assessing students' grasp of the material. Two examples of such an essay are provided here.

Introduction to the Qur'an (1 session)

Introduction in *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader*

Chapter 1 – The Natural Environment (sections of chapters are identified)

Session 1 – A Parable; A Theocentric Framework; The Work of Creation

Session 2 – The Works of Creation

Chapter 2 – Family Matters

Session 1 – Kinship; Love; Family Ties

Session 2 – Marriage; Divorce; Inheritance; The Family of the Prophet Muhammad

Chapter 3 – Gender and Sexuality

Session 1 – Terminology; Feminist Readings of the Qur'an; The Egalitarian Core

Session 2 – Problematic Passages; The Veil; Menstruation; Sexual Activity

Chapter 4 – Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations

Session 1 – The Language of Religion; Religious Groups

Session 2 – Pluralism

Chapter 5 – *Jihād*

Session 1 – A Complex Term; *Jihād* in the Qur'an

Session 2 – The Two Forms of *Jihād*; Usama bin Ladin's *Jihād* and Use of the Qur'an

Chapter 6 – Violence and War

Session 1 – The Language of Violence; Types of Violence in the Qur'an; A Range of Responses

Session 2 – Explaining the Violence

Chapter 7 – Death and the Afterlife

Session 1 – Reward and Punishment; Repentance; Death; Eschatology

Session 2 – Hell; Heaven

Final Session

General Discussion; Student Papers/Essays

SAMPLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

- (1) This section of the course has considered how the Qur'an addresses seven issues: The Natural Environment, Family Matters, Gender and Sexuality, Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations, *Jihād*, Violence and War, and Death and the Afterlife. On which of these issues do you think the Qur'an's teaching is most essential for the modern world? Evaluate how the Qur'an addresses that issue and explain the implications of how it does so.

- (2) Compose a statement that describes your personal methodology for how to read and interpret the Qur'an. What issues must the reader keep in mind? What are some of the common pitfalls and dangers to be aware of? What steps should the reader take to avoid them? How should an ancient text like the Qur'an be used to address contemporary concerns and issues like the ones we have discussed?