

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA  
Departments of Religion and Women's Studies  
**WOMEN AND ISLAM**

**Religion 5361/025G /Women Studies 5365/013G/1F51**

**Spring 2019**

**Graduate Syllabus**

Mondays – 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> Periods – AND 13 (5:10 PM – 7:05PM)

Wednesdays 10<sup>th</sup> Period – AND 13 (5:10-6:00PM)

Instructor: Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, Ph.D.  
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Office Hours: Tuesdays: 1:00 – 4:00PM  
And by appointment

**Course Description & Objectives:**

In this course we will address the difficult, controversial and highly provocative topic “*Women and Islam.*” Most non-Muslims credit Islam as being the root cause of the oppression of women in the Muslim world. But in reality women’s status in the Islamic world is not simply because of Islam, based on the Qur’an and the views of the Prophet Muhammad. A growing number of Muslim women scholars and activists have begun to challenge the notion that Islam is synonymous with the oppression of women. I count myself amongst this group. These women, many of whom like me consider ourselves feminists, are questioning the male and often misogynist interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam. We are focusing a womanist or a feminist lens on Islam’s canon and are deriving different interpretations from those that have prevailed for centuries, just as Jewish and Christian feminists have done. This course on “*Women and Islam*” will cast a feminist insider perspective on the volatile subject of “Women and Islam,” by primarily using Muslim women feminist scholars’ texts on the subject.

**COURSE GOALS:**

- Learn the history of early Islam and the role of women in the early development of this religious tradition.
- Learn about the evolving role of women in Islam and how male interpretations of Islam’s holiest texts have shaped this evolution.
- Study what the Qur’an actually says about women versus the interpretations which have played a profound role on Muslim women’s lives.
- Study the role of the Hadith and Shari’ah Law on Muslim women’s lives.
- Understand the complex power relationships that shape Muslim women’s identity.

- Learn about Progressive Muslim women’s efforts to change the status of women in this tradition.
- Critically reflect upon and possibly challenge the viewpoints of the scholars whose works we are studying.
- Develop the students own perspective on the role of women, past, present and future in the Muslim world.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### Attendance and Participation:

We will attempt to cover a large amount of material during the term; therefore your participation and attendance in class are very important. You are **permitted 3 unexcused absences** without penalty. However, unexcused absences without a valid reason after the first three will impact negatively upon your grade. Each class missed is extremely important. For each unexcused absence after the first three, you will lose grade points as follows:

- 4<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns an A into an A-
- 5<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns an A- into a B+
- 6<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns a B+ into a B-
- 7<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns a B- into a C+
- 8<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns a C+ into a C-
- 9<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns a C- into a D+
- 10<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence turns a D+ in to a D-

Excused absences include the following: an illness verified with a note from the UF infirmary or your doctor or dentist on **their letterhead** saying that you were ill during the day (s) you missed. Also a death in the family documented by an official notice of the death and your relationship to the deceased qualifies as an excused absence. If you are on a UF sports team, in the band, glee club, choir, orchestra, etc., and you need to miss class because of an engagement, I need documentation on the official letterhead of the organization stating that you will be away on University business on a day that this class meets. I will appreciate your letting me know in advance of such trips or engagements. If you have scheduled job, intern interviews or the like, these also qualify as excused absences. Attending a conference in your discipline is also an excused absence with proof of your attendance. Please let me know in advance that you will be away for this purpose.

### Graduate Assignments:

1. Reading the assignments and listing three important points (or questions) that you have from each of the assigned chapters from each of the books that the students are reading for that day. These points/questions are to be typed as they will be collected at the end of class and you may be called upon to read them in class. These points or questions will serve as the basis for our discussion of the assigned readings. You three points per assigned chapter in our readings will account for **15%** of your grade for the

term. I will ask students to share their three key points or questions from each class randomly.

2. Five Reaction Papers (seven pages minimum) to be written during the term on all of the assigned readings for the days on which you chose to write your Reaction Papers. Additionally, each graduate student will facilitate the class discussion of two class periods in which they have written a Reaction Paper. On that day, you will write your Reaction Paper (to turn in to me) and prepare a hand-out for the class on which you have outlined the readings or prepared synopses of each of the assigned readings (this means each chapter of each book assigned for that day's class.) The cumulative grade for your five Reaction Papers plus your class facilitation of two classes will account for 25% of your grade for the term.
3. Two Book Reviews of two outside books to be read during the term, and reported on to the class with a two page synopsis of the books to be distributed to the class when you make your oral reports on the books to the class. The written Book Reviews, plus your oral reports with handout will account for 20% of your grade. You will most likely want to select books related to your Research Project with my approval. All books should be related to our class topic - *Women and Islam* as should your Research Paper. Think about publishing your book reviews in a scholarly journal or in a publication like the New York Times or other periodicals.
4. Final Research Paper (twenty page minimum) related to the topic of *Women and Islam*. You should begin thinking about a topic early in the semester as you will give me your first thoughts on your research topic during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of the class or earlier if you like. When writing your Research Paper, you are to use four sources in addition to any of the books, magazine or journal articles that we will use in class. This is to be a formal research paper with footnotes, a bibliography, and standard academic paper margins. Guidelines for writing Research Papers will be posted on our class E-Learning site & sent via our class list... The Final Research Paper will count for 30% of your grade for the term.
5. Attendance to a Juma' Prayer service or to an Islamic event during the term on campus or elsewhere is required. Attendance at such an event will count for 10% of your grade for the term.

**Grades for Graduate Students will be based on the following:**

- **Class participation** which includes you having and turning in three key points or questions from each of the assigned readings for each class period - 15%
- **Five Reaction Papers** to be written over the term, plus two class facilitations plus hand-outs on the day you facilitate the class - 25%
- **Book Review** of two outside books (I advise you to select books related to your Research Paper as they can be two of the five outside readings), plus oral reports on the books with brief handouts - 20% (10% each)

- **Final Research Paper - 30%**
- **Attendance at a Juma' or other Islamic service or program event – 10%**

**Note:** Your weekly listing of the three key points (or questions) from each chapter of each book assigned for a particular class will be collected and are to be thought about, typed neatly so that you can read them in class easily. Also your Reaction Papers are to be typed, double-spaced with regular fonts (10-12 pt.) and 1” margins all around... The book reports are to be 7 to 10 pages typed, double-spaced with 10-12 pt. fonts and regular academic margins. The guidelines for your Book Reports, Reaction Papers and Research Papers will be posted on our E-Learning site and sent via our e-mail class list.

For graduate students these are the texts to be read:

Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale UP, 1992, ISBN: 0-300-05583-8. (required) (Undergrads are reading this book also.)

Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics & Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith & Jurisprudence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, One World Publications, 2016, ISBN: 978-1-78074381-3. (required) (Undergrads are reading this book also.)

Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, One World Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-85168-556-1. (required) (Undergrads are reading this book also.)

Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Mulki Al-Sharmani, eds., *Men In Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition*, One World Publications, 2015, ISBN: 9781780747163. (required) (Undergrads are reading this book also.) [**Not in the Bookstore – Must be ordered**]

Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex & Gender*, Yale U.P., 1991, ISBN 0-300-05697-4 (required) [**Not in the Bookstore – Must be ordered**]

Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Oxford U.P., 2014, ISBN 978-01999359578) [**Not in the Bookstore – Must be ordered**]

Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America*, Yale UP, 2011, ISBN: 978-0-300-18143-2. (required) (Undergrads are reading this book also.)

Each of these books with the exception of those noted should be available at the UF book store as they were ordered there. You can possibly purchase these books more cheaply from on-line book sellers like Amazon.com and half.com or you can rent them from our book store. Hopefully you have (or will get) an Amazon Prime account so that you can get the books delivered in two days free. The first book that both the undergrads and grads will read is the Leila Ahmed's book

*Women, Gender and Islam*. Graduate students will also read Keddie and Baron's *Women in Middle Eastern History* at the same time and you should therefore purchase them first. We will read additional articles sent via e-mail and posted on our e-Learning course site.

### **My view of the classroom experience; your role and mine:**

I see the optimal learning environment as one in which the students and the teacher are actively engaged in the learning and teaching process. The class belongs to everyone in it and everyone has the responsibility to make the class interesting and inviting. "I will not be feeding you facts that you will then regurgitate."<sup>1</sup> Each of you is expected to contribute to the class experience by having thoroughly read the assigned materials, written out and be prepared to share at least three major things from each chapter of the books assigned for that day's readings. Each of you will share your three major findings aloud in class as time permits. These key points from each of you will serve as the basis for our discussion for each class. I will serve as a facilitator for our discussions initially during the term but will expect each graduate member of the class to facilitate two of our discussions during the term. The facilitator will begin the class with their comments on all of the readings, (accompanied by a hand-out or Power Point with an outline or synopsis of each of the readings) call upon the students to share their key issues, which they have written out for the week's readings and to moderate the classroom discussion.

### **Classroom Environment:**

We will be discussing sensitive, controversial and sometimes volatile issues in this class, including; Islam and women, feminist critiques of the Qur'an, Hadith, Shari'ah (Islamic law) sexism in Islam, etc. It is likely that our class will be religiously diverse including students from all of the major religions. Some of the things that we read might be disturbing or unsettling. Therefore we must all agree that "everyone has the right to their own opinion and the right to a classroom free from hostility, ridicule, or embarrassment"<sup>2</sup> Every student is expected to be mature, to act responsibly and understand that we are engaged in the Academic Study of Religion, in which all issues are open for critique and discussion. No relevant topics are off limits. No one is expected to agree with me or with any of the readings or video documentaries that we will read and watch this term. Your grade will not be based on your agreement with me or the authors of the readings. Everyone is encouraged/urged to state his or her opinions without fear of reprisal. The only requirement is that your views be based upon reading the materials and rational thought.

### **Ethical Conduct:**

The university and I expect the highest degree of ethical conduct and comportment in this class. Getting caught cheating will lead to failure in this class as well as university disciplinary action. Examples of cheating include: plagiarizing a written assignment, copying from another student's work or letting someone copy from yours, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Crawley, Syllabus for "Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Women", Summer A 2000, p 2.

<sup>2</sup> Crawley, 2.

**Please Note:** I have set up a list serve for the class by which I will communicate on a regular basis, in addition to posting announcement in the class's e-Learning site. I will send notices about up-coming events that might be of interest, also articles from the web of interest, etc. I invite members of the class to send me articles and information, which I will forward to the rest of the class.

I look forward to an intellectually stimulating and exciting semester. Welcome Aboard!

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