

AS 100.262 – *Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the medieval Middle East*

This course is about religious difference in the Middle Ages (ca. 8th-15th centuries), in the region we now call the Middle East (roughly, Iran to Egypt). Islam emerged in 7th-c Arabia, amidst a religious mosaic including various Eastern Christianities (e.g. Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, etc.), Judaism, Zoroastrianism, etc. And while the rapid Arab-Muslim conquests drastically transformed the political map of the region bringing a vast area (from southern France all the way to Sind) under Muslim political rule, Muslims remained a demographic minority in most regions for centuries after. Our investigation ends before the similarly dramatic conquests of the region by the Ottoman empire (early 16th century).

The course primarily asks questions about interactions between (members of) different religious communities. How did members of one community live and interact with those of another on a daily basis? What traditions and models informed the ways by which Muslim rulers interacted with their non-Muslim subjects? How did these experiences vary across geography and how did they change over the course of the Middle Ages? What were some of the main reasons and contexts in which non-Muslims converted to Islam?

Our focus in this seminar will *not* be the usual highlights of textbooks and surveys—i.e. not on kings and courts, empires and battles. The course explores religious boundaries of various sorts, but our primary focus will be on lived history. We turn to legal and theological discourses, which present prescriptive visions for how things *should* be, in Part I, an initial module on scriptural prescriptions and how these informed normative attitudes regarding religious encounters. The rest of the course (Parts II-IV) will focus on the *lived* reality of such encounters, on *the social history of religion*. What affected the ways non-Muslims interacted with the various Islamic states under which they lived? In what ways was the spread of Arabic related (or not) to the spread of Islam among different regional populations? Why did a language like Persian survive (and become the second major language of Islam) although almost all Iranian Zoroastrians converted to Islam, whereas Coptic disappeared but Coptic Christians in Egypt remain the largest non-Muslim minority in the Middle East today?

Learning Goals: The main goal of the course is to introduce students to the world of medieval Islamic societies and the complex ways that religious pluralism was managed, underwent historical change, and varied by region (e.g., Iran vs. Egypt) and setting (e.g. rural vs. urban). Second, although this is beginning to change, the Middle Ages (and Islam) are often invoked as the founts of bigotry and religious violence, antitheses of modern virtues like ‘tolerance’ and ‘religious freedom’; by exploring various understandings of religious difference (especially through our close readings of primary sources), students will judge for themselves the accuracy and relevance of such modern verdicts. Finally, understanding a radically different world is also an occasion to reexamine our own, to rethink some of the ‘givens’ that we traditionally consider inevitable and natural, including modern liberal ideas about sensitivity to other faiths/communities.

Approach

The pace at which long-term processes like Arabization, Islamization, and religious conversion unfolded varied greatly by region (e.g. in Iran vs. Egypt vs. Andalusia). Single overviews of this complex topic—that synthesize distinct timelines over more than eight centuries—risk flattening out important differences. Moreover, such accounts often keep us far from individual historical actors (e.g. a rural Coptic Christian in Egypt and his gradual adoption of Arabic as a language for writing a letters to his friends; a Cairene Jewish widow’s choice between addressing a rabbinic court or going to the Islamic *qādi* court, etc.)—away from the textured world of everyday life, where we can see both the structural constraints on individual actions as well as the logic behind actors’ choices.

To avoid such problems of synthetic accounts, this course explores *selected themes* at the boundaries between religious communities and addresses each one

- (a) through **comparative case studies** that illustrate variances within the larger thematic rubrics (labelled A-D, see below; e.g., comparing Christian martyrdom in Cordoba vs. Cairo, etc.), and
- (b) focus on **close readings of primary sources** related to these cases (e.g., a 15th-c. Muslim chronicle describing non-elite conversions, or court documents of Jewish women suing Jewish men in Islamic courts).

Roadmap

After the first 2 weeks, when we cover the emergence of Islam and the Arab-Muslim conquests, our course will be divided into four main sections addressing

- A. Structural foundations: the Islamic tradition on non-Muslims (scripture and law), with Jewish and European Christian comparanda (*week 3*);
- B. Long-term developments, especially Arabization, religious conversion, and Islamization (*weeks 4-8*);
- C. Everyday encounters, including hierarchy and systemic differentiation, including non-Muslim appeals to Islamic courts (*weeks 10-12*), and
- D. Episodic developments, including martyrdom and changing attitudes towards non-Muslim bureaucrats (*weeks 13-14*).

Starting Week 3, the course will take the following general structure (see pp. 4-5 for table):

- Mondays will be devoted to a specific theme—and here we discuss secondary studies on the topic (labeled **A**);
- Wednesdays (labeled **B**) will include in-class close readings of primary sources, usually ones related to the theme discussed that Monday.

NOTE: You are not required to buy any books for this course; PDFs of assigned readings will be uploaded online. Given the problem of locating e-versions of/scanning some (older) works, a few of the assigned readings are subject to revision.

Course Requirements & Grades

Students are expected to attend *all meetings*, prepare the readings assigned for that week, and actively participate in class discussions. Three unexcused absences result in an automatic F for the course.

Exams There are no ‘exams’; all work will consist of written assignments: both short reading responses and a few essays (for which you may consult your notes and readings).

Grades will be assigned as follows:

- 25% Attendance and **participation** (includes your presentations of articles and primary documents: *at the start of every meeting, each of the assigned readings will be introduced by a student—see below on the format of these short introductions*).
- 25% **Very Short Responses:** after completing the weekly *secondary* readings (A/Monday material), student post ~1-2 paragraphs online in response to them (as a whole)—ending with 1-2 discussion questions.
- 25% **Two Essays:** Each essay will answer one of two prompts/questions I provide; a third option *may* consist of an unseen primary document that you analyze and provide a commentary on. Your essays must cite and discuss at least two relevant primary documents/passages. **Essay #1 should be ~4 pages (~900 words: 10% of grade, due before w6); Essay #2 ~5 pages (~1,500 words: 15% of grade, due before w11);** see Table overleaf.
- 25% A longer **Final Exam:** this has a similar format to the midterm: students answer two of four questions/prompts). Each essay should be **~4 pages (~1,200 words)**. Questions posted: 4/30 at noon; answers due by 5pm on 5/4.

Written Work

All student work to be submitted either on Canvas. Essays should be in MS Word or PDF files.

Formatting: Margins: 1” all around; double-space texts; font size 12 point. The first word in the filename should be your last name; number all pages.

Unexcused late submissions (e.g. without a doctor’s note) are penalized one grade ‘notch’ for each day late (e.g. an essay drops from A- to B if handed in two days late).

Readings

“Do not read superficially, lest you do me an injury, and derive no benefit for yourself. You must study thoroughly and read continually; for you will then find the solution of those important problems of religion, which are a source of anxiety to all intelligent men.”

— Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (13th-c. Egypt)

“Context is one of the most important indications of the speaker’s intended meaning. Overlooking context is likely to lead to misunderstanding [of any text] and false argumentation.”

— ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 14th-c. Muslim polymath

Pay heed to these wise words when reading—and writing. You are responsible for completing all assigned reading—carefully, critically, and thoughtfully—before coming to class. Occasionally, we will provide a few points or reading questions to guide you (e.g. what to look for in a text), but you are responsible for asking your own active questions of the texts, rather than languishing in passive reading.

Writing

Plagiarism will result in an automatic F for the course. Keep all your notes and source material and be prepared to explain any writing you submit. In your response and exam essays, I am looking for indications that you have read and thoughtfully engaged the material—originally and critically. An essay is an argument; I need not agree with yours, but I expect it to address the issues raised in class and in the readings—and to be coherent and logically supported. I will discuss and provide more suggestions regarding essays later in the semester. Always remember the difference between a statement and argument (supporting evidence); we are only interested in the latter.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the medieval ME – Weekly Topics Outline

• **PRI** = primary source

WEEK/DATE	A. MONDAYS: THEME	B. WEDNESDAYS: PRIMARY SOURCES
Week 1 ¹ Jan. 23 & 25	<i>Introduction</i> (<i>syllabus + in-class reading of 2 primary documents</i>) • PRI : A curious Coptic-Arabic sheet from Middle Egypt	Jack Tannous, <i>The Making of the Muslim Middle East...</i> (2018): ○ Introduction (pp. 1-8); ○ Chapter 10 (pp. 260-309)
Week 2 Jan. 30 and Feb. 1	Rise of Islam and the Arab-Muslim conquests ² Ira Lapidus. <i>A History of Islamic Societies...</i> , chaps. 2-4 (pp. 18-66). Cohen, Mark. “Myth and Countermyth” in <i>Under Crescent and Cross...</i> pp. 3-14.	• PRI : “Voices of the Conquered” pp. 344-62 • PRI : Extracts on early caliphs & conquests (6 pp) • PRI : al-Balādhurī, <i>Book of Conquests...</i> “The Conquest of Iran: Khuzistan” II: 105-24.
Week 3 Feb. 6 and 8	Islamic Foundations: Scripture, Law (<i>Pact of Umar</i>) ³ Friedmann, “Introduction” and “Is there no compulsion in religion?” (pp. 1-12 and 87-120) Wasserstein, “Ahl al-dhimma” (pp. 201-208) Cohen, M. “What was the Pact of ‘Umar?” – selections only: pp. 100-14 and 124-30.	PRI : Extracts: Non-Muslims in the Islamic tradition (9 pp). PRI : The <i>Pact of Umar</i> (two versions, 5 pp) + On collecting the jizya (4 pp) PRI : Comparative views on Religious Others. Medieval Christian and Jewish views: Thomas Aquinas and Maimonides (5 pp)
Week 4 Feb. 13 and 15	Arabization in Egypt ⁴ Papaconstantinou, Arrieta. “They shall speak Arabic Language and Take Pride in it: Reconsidering the Fate of Coptic after the Arab Conquest” (pp. 273-99). Zaborowski, Jason. “From Coptic to Arabic in Medieval Egypt” (15-40).	Arabization in medieval Iberia/al-Andalusia Wassertein, David. “The language situation in al-Andalus” (pp. 1-15). Gallego, María Angeles. “The languages of medieval Iberia and their religious dimension” (pp. 107-39). Penelas, Mayte. “Linguistic Islamization of the Mozarabs ...” (pp. 103-114).
Week 5 Feb. 20 and 22	Conversion I: Comparisons ⁵ Levtzion, Nehemia. “Towards a Comparative Study of Islamization” in <i>Conversion to Islam...</i> pp. 1-23. Carlson, “When did the Middle East become Muslim?” pp. 1-7. Conversion II: Iran Bulliet, Richard. “Conversion Stories in early Islam” in <i>Process and Status...</i> pp. 123-133. Bulliet, <i>View from the Edge</i> , chap. 3 (pp. 37-66)	• PRI : “A Multireligious city in Khurāsān converts to Islam?” by al-Balkhī (pp. 88-93) • PRI : “The Mass Conversion of Christians in Northern Mesopotamia” by Joshua the Stylite of Zuqnān (pp. 101-104) • PRI : “Three Accounts of Zoroastrian Conversion to Islam” by al-Jahshiyārī, ibn al-Qiftū, and al-Isfahānī (pp. 109-113) • PRI : “Zoroastrian Priests Offer Legal Advice about Conversion” by Ādurfarnbag son of Farrozzād 𐬰𐬀 𐬀𐬎𐬌 son of Ašwahišt (pp. 131-135)
ESSAY 1	Questions posted: noon on Friday 2/24	Essay 1 due: by 5pm on Sun. 2/26

WEEK/DATE	A. MONDAYS: THEME	B. WEDNESDAYS: PRIMARY SOURCES
Week 6 Feb. 27 and Mar. 1	Conversion III: Egypt⁶ Lev, Yaacov. "The Fatimid caliph, the Copts, and the Coptic Church" (pp. 390-410). Pruitt, Jennifer. "Method in Madness. Reconsidering Church Destruction under al-Hakim" (pp. 119-134). Rapoport, Yossef. <i>Rural Economy and Tribal Society in Islamic Egypt</i> , chaps. 8, 9 and Conclusion (pp. 205-252).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Conversion to Islam under al-Hākim, Michael of Tinnis (pp. 178-183) • PRI: Conversion of Abd al-Sayyid, Damascene Jew by al-Yunīnī] (pp. 272-274) • PRI: Conversion of Copts under Duress in late 13th century, Maqrīzī (pp. 275-278)
Week 7 Mar. 6 and 8 [NO meetings: I'm at a conference]	Primary Texts by Non-Muslims and converts⁷ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: "A Christian Intellectual Declines to Convert to Islam" by Hunayn b. Ishāq (9th c.) • PRI: "A Christian Convert's Examination of His Former Faith" by al-Hasan b. Ayyūb (10th c.) • PRI: "The Tribulations of a Converted Man's Daughter" by Bar Hebraeus (13th c.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: "A Polemical Treatise by a 12th-c. Jewish Convert to Islam" by Abū Nasr Samaw' al b. Yahyā al-Maghribī (12th c.) • PRI: "A Syriac Communal Lament over Apostasy" (ca. 13th-14th c.) <p>→ Readings to be discussed in week 8 meetings</p>
Week 8 Mar. 13 and 15	Conversion IV: North Africa & Iberia/Andalusia⁸ Michael Brett. "Conversion/Islamisation of the Berbers" (pp. 189 -195) Maribel Fierro. "The Islamisation of al-Andalus: Recent Studies" (pp. 199-207).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Andalusian Notarial Form for recording conversion (pp 160-165) • PRI: Conversion, Prayer, and Apostasy in Iberian Legal Questions (pp 186-192)
Week 9 Mar. 20 and 22	Spring Break: no meetings⁹	
Week 10 Mar. 27 and 29	Everyday Encounters I: Poverty and the Poll-tax¹⁰ Mark Cohen, <i>Poverty and Charity in the medieval Jewish community of Egypt...</i> chaps. 3 and 4 (pp. 109-138).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Geniza Letters and Petitions about the poll-tax (<i>Voice of the Poor</i>, chaps. 3-5: pp. 47-82).
ESSAY 2 Essay 2 Questions posted: 3/31 @ noon Essay 2 due: by 5pm on Sun. 4/2		
Week 11 Apr. 3 and 5	Everyday Encounters II: Social and Festive Encounters¹¹ Shoshan, <i>Popular Culture in medieval Cairo</i> , chap. 3 (pp. 40-51). Lutfi, Huda. "Coptic Festivals of the Nile" (pp. 254-284). Cuffel. "Shared saints and festivals as women's religion" (pp. 401-415). Patel, Y. "Their fires shall not be visible. The sense of Muslim difference" (pp. 3-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Jāhiz, "Why [9th-c. commoner] Muslims prefer Christians to Jews and Zoroastrians" (pp. 169-170) • PRI: (Geniza petition regarding) "A Jewish addict to Sufism" (pp. 37-45 [intro] and 48-9 [doc.]) • PRI: "Everyday Conversions to Islam in Late-Medieval Damascus: cases #2, and 5-8, and 11-12 (pp. 317-321).
Week 12 Apr. 10 and 12	Everyday Encounters III/Islamization: Family, Islamic Courts and Social Status¹² Lev Weiz. "Islamic Law on the Provincial Margins: Christian Patrons and Muslim Notaries in Upper Egypt... 8th-11th Centuries" (pp. 5-39) Zinger, Oded. "'She aims to harass him': Jewish women in Muslim legal venues in medieval Egypt" <i>AJS Review</i> 42 (2018): 159-187.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Zinger, "Jewish Women in Muslim Legal Venues. Seven documents" (pp. 38-66) • PRI: "Jurist's Responses to Questions Regarding the Conversion of One Spouse [ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya]" (pp. 290-294)

WEEK/DATE	A. MONDAYS: THEME	B. WEDNESDAYS: PRIMARY SOURCES
<p>Week 13 Apr. 17 and 19</p>	<p>Episodic Encounters I: Apostasy and Martyrdom¹³ Coope, Jessica. “Religious and Cultural Conversion to Islam in Ninth-Century Umayyad Córdoba” <i>Journal of World History</i> 4 (1993): 47-68. Yagur, Moshe. “Religiously mixed families in the Mediterranean society of the Cairo Geniza” <i>Medieval Historical Review</i> 35 (2020): 27-42. El-Leithy, “A Wave of Coptic martyrs in the Ritual City” (pp. 1-32).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: Conversion and Martyrdom in ‘Abbasid Damascus (pp. 105-108) • PRI: Conversion and Martyrdom in Córdoba, by Eulogius of Córdoba (pp. 119-122) • PRI: “A Letter of Maimonides about Conversion and Martyrdom” (pp. 215-219) • PRI: “Apostasy in Jewish Responsa, by the Geonim of Babylonia and Abraham Maimonides” (pp. 220-226)
<p>Week 14 Apr. 24 and 26</p>	<p>Episodic Encounters II: Political Sovereignty and the non-Muslim officials of the Islamic State¹⁴ Darling, Linda. “Medieval Egyptian Society and the concept of the Circle of Justice” (pp. 1-17). El-Leithy, “Sufis, Copts, and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in 14th-century Upper Egypt” in Sabra and McGregor, eds. <i>The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt ...</i>, pp. 75-120. Yarbrough, Luke. “A Christian official in the Mamluk state speaks: Ibn al-Suqa’i on minorities and power” in <i>Minorities in contact in the medieval Mediterranean</i> (pp. 231-244).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PRI: an-Nabūlusī (ca. 1240s), <i>Sword of Ambition...</i> selection: “Chapter 2: A Description of the Copts...” pp. 54-97 (22 pages) <p style="text-align: center;">Final Discussion</p>
<p>FINAL ESSAY Final questions posted: noon on Friday 4/28 Final Essays due: 5pm on Wed. 5/3</p>		