MEIS-GA 2725 / RELST-GA 1505
Problems and Methods in the Study of Islam
Marion Katz
Mondays 4:55-7:35 PM, Silver room 504

Course description: This course provides an overview of the field of Islamic studies, focusing on critical examination of the evolving politics and assumptions of the field and on the yields and advantages of different approaches to the study of Islam. It is intended both for those who are specializing in Islamic studies and those interested in the ways in which various aspects of Islam have been conceptualized in the Western academy. Some sessions will address broad framing questions – Does the concept of “Islamic civilization” have continuing utility? How was the demonization of militant Sufis in the nineteenth century supplanted by the stigmatization of “Shari’a law” by the twenty-first? What is the role of religious faith and institutions in the academic study of Islam? Others juxtapose methodologically contrasting studies of a representative set of major topics, such as the interpretation of the early Islamic conquests, the Sufi master-disciple relationship, and the role of the fatwa. Readings will be drawn from multiple disciplines, including history, religious studies, philology, and anthropology. Students should come away with an understanding of the trends and controversies animating the field.

Course requirements: The most fundamental requirement is that you attend class having read the assigned readings and participate actively in discussion.

Written assignments:

Each week: 2-page paper (may be in bullet points), submitted by e-mail at least two hours before class, identifying points for discussion on the assigned readings (including comments on the authors’ tacit assumptions, the gains and weaknesses of their approaches, and the ways in which they contrast with each other)

Term paper (18-20 pages, due May 20)

1. Choose some concrete topic or issue in Islamic studies, survey the scholarship addressing it, and write a meta-analysis discussing the different approaches and your assessment of their comparative value and the insights they yield
2. Choose a specific approach (such as the study of inscriptions or the use of digital humanities) and discuss its actual and/or potential use in some area of Islamic studies
3. Choose your own topic, provided it’s meaningfully related to methods in Islamic studies
Calculation of final grade: Participation 30%, Weekly papers 30%, final paper 40%

**Books to acquire:**

Most readings are either available from Bobst Library as e-books or are limited selections that will be provided as pdfs on the Classes website for the course. You should acquire the following books (either by purchasing them or by ordering them from EZ Borrow in good time to prepare for class), because they are not available as e-books and we will be reading significant sections of the text:


Weekly schedule of readings:

Part I: Framing the Field

January 28
**Introductory discussion: The location of Islamic studies in the academy**

February 4
**What Is Islam?**

February 11
**The big picture: “Islamic Civilization,” the “Muslim World,” and “Muslim Networks”**
In addition: Look over Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Islamic Civilization” (by Marilyn Waldman) and the table of contents/general format of the Cambridge History of Islam/New Cambridge History of Islam or the Encyclopaedia of Islam (Second or Third Edition); think about what the category of “Islamic Civilization” or “Islamic History” includes and excludes

Part II: Topics and Debates

February 18

**The Rise of Islam**

February 25

**The ʿulama and Islamic education**

March 4

**The study of ḥadīth**
March 11

**Islamic law: Studying the fatwa**


March 18 no class (spring break)

March 25

**Sufism: Studying the master-disciple relationship**


April 1

**Islamic ritual: Studying ṣalāt**


April 8

**Sectarianism: Sunnism and Shi’ism**


April 15

**The study of Salafism**


April 22

**The anthropology of Islam**

Reading: Jens Kreinath, *The Anthropology of Islam Reader* (2012), Parts I and III (pp. 1-110, 269-343; selections from Gilsenan, Geertz, El Zein, Asad, Ahmed, Tapper, Said, and Varisco)

April 29

**Islam in everyday life**


Part III: Framing the Field 2

May 6

**Insiders, outsiders, and normativity in the study of Islam**


May 13: **Paper presentations**