

# Anthro738

## Anthropology & World Religions

2019

### ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ISLAM

**Convenor:** Dr Christine Dureau

**Seminars:** Mon. 3.00 – 5.00 pm

**NOTE: NO LAPTOPS, I-PADS, ETC., IN SEMINARS. Bring your readings and notes in HARD COPY. All electronic devices are to be turned off during class.**

**Office Hours:** Monday 12 md – 1 pm  
Tuesday 12 md – 1 pm

Please adhere to these hours. Email for an appointment if you cannot do so.

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#### Important Dates:

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Essay Proposal  | Thurs. 15 <sup>th</sup> Aug., 4 pm. |
| <b>NB: Absolute final deadline</b>   | 23 <sup>rd</sup> Aug.               |
| 2. Essay Proper  | Thurs. 26 <sup>th</sup> Sept., 4 pm |
| 3. Review  | Thurs. 24 <sup>th</sup> Oct., 4 pm  |
| 4. Seminar leadership  | various dates                       |
| <b>NB: Write-up absolute final deadline</b>  | Tues. 29 <sup>th</sup> Oct., 4 pm   |
| 5. Negotiation of Coursework Deadlines on Basis of Overall Workload, Personal Considerations, etc. | Tues. 30 <sup>th</sup> July 3 pm    |

**IRRESPECTIVE OF CIRCUMSTANCES, I WILL NOT ACCEPT COURSEWORK AFTER  
4 PM FRIDAY 8<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER.**



Welcome to Anthro738 Anthropology & World Religions 2019: Anthropological Approaches to Islam.

**Reading this material—I know it's lengthy—should give you a starting point for what we are about, help you to position yourself in the course and impart at least some understanding what's expected of you in your coursework.**

This reading and discussion course addresses classical and contemporary anthropological approaches to Islam and a selection of topics via a mix of conceptual commentaries and ethnographies by Muslim and non-Muslim anthropologists.

Islam, one of the largest of the world religions, is entangled in global and local politics, including here. While there have been Muslims in Aotearoa/New Zealand for a long time, Islam has become increasingly prominent in public and private politics over recent years. This prominence is partly, but only partly, related to increasing international Muslim migration to places with previously small Muslim populations; the visual practices of some Muslims (e.g., in architectural forms and modes of attire); global awareness of extremist versions of the religion; media representations (informed at least as much by ignorance, stereotypes and bigotry or patronizing tolerance as much as by knowledge or understanding) and by the politicization of the religion by members and non-members. Unfortunately, much of the talk and writing about it, from both good- and bad-willed commentators, is marked by ignorance, simplification and suppression of Islam's diversity and complexity.

In such a context, Anthropology's commitment to ethnographically-based knowledge proffers a much-needed corrective to emotive othering and good-willed ignorance. In particular, our disciplinary insistence on understanding the dense particularities of cultural worlds enable us to deconstruct "common-sense" and "general knowledge" in order to take account of how any religion is entangled in political, gendered, economic and ideological forces as well as marked by the intimacies of belief and spirituality and social and kin networks.

Understanding something about Islam requires grasping its character as a "world religion", one globally connected by some commonalities of doctrine, textual commitment and practice and simultaneously marked by the distinctive forms and understandings that make it sufficiently flexible to be deeply meaningful in radically different cultural worlds and social situations. This concurrent commonality and distinctiveness means that, like all world religions, it is marked by historically and culturally particular forms as a result of cultural translation and hybridization and the local circumstances of its establishment and continuity. And this, as in all such religions, makes it susceptible to doctrinaire and fundamentalist efforts to control its content, political appropriation and destructive othering.

**THE COURSE IS *NOT* INTENDED TO DETERMINE WHAT ISLAM IS OR IS NOT.** Nor is it an account of its major forms (Shi'ite, Sufi, Sunni, etc.), although those may be significant to your reading and coursework. Rather, **the emphasis is on developing general understanding of anthropological approaches to a religion that has profoundly inflected our world.**

In enrolling in this course, you are not expected to have expertise in Anthropology or Islam (or religion more broadly), but you are expected to be open to learning about the discipline, about the phenomenon of religion and about Islam as a sociological and cultural phenomenon. Whether you are

religious, irreligious or anti-religious, I hope you find that the course helps you to better understand a little about one of the topics of our time.

We read ethnographies and commentaries by both Muslim and non-Muslim anthropologists, bookending our seminars with, first, the piece broadly understood as the foundational anthropological approach to Islam as a world religion and, finally with a commentary on this and other “classical” approaches. In between, we look in depth at ethnographies concerned with some topical issues in Islam (this year these concern gender, embodiment and immigrant Muslims in the West).

## Course Objectives

**By the end of the course, you should have**

- Broad familiarity with some of the key issues in anthropological approaches to Islam
- Awareness of the nature of world religions
- An ability to think critically about accounts and representations of Islam
- A capacity to use course materials to consider social and cultural issues concerning Islam, specifically, and religion, more generally, in your own and other societies
- A deeper knowledge and understanding of political, economic, cultural, symbolic and ideological aspects of religion.

## Disabled Students

Please let me know early in the course of any difficulties you may have or assistance I may reasonably render. Information about Disabilities Services can be found here: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/on-campus/student-support/personal-support/students-with-disabilities.html>. They can be contacted via: [disability@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:disability@auckland.ac.nz).

## Course Description

This is a reading and discussion course and you are crucial to its success for yourself and for others. You must read the set materials and participate in the discussions each week. The ability to discuss ideas and to formulate logical arguments is a crucial professional skill in the contexts in which you will work, as well as an important part of academic practice. Accordingly, 10% of your final grade is allotted to this.

It is possible that some course components may change because of unanticipated problems, or because we negotiate improvements. Thank you for your understanding.

## Coursework and Assessment

### Workload

The expected workload commitment for a 15-pt course is approximately 10 hours/week throughout the semester, including study break. You should therefore be dedicating about eight hours/week, independently of classes, to reading, preparing for assignments and revising your notes. This course is predicated on this workload and designed to allow you to work in-depth by linking much of your coursework to the lectures and set readings.

## Coursework Components:

1. Class Participation: 10%
2. Seminar Leadership & write-up 20%
3. Essay: 40%
  - Essay Proposal 10%
  - Essay Proper 30%
4. Book Review: 30%

See [738 Coursework 2019.pdf](#) on Canvas for information about coursework requirements, presentation and submission, including negotiated deadlines, late work and extensions. You need to read this carefully in order to ensure the best results for yourself.

## WEEKLY TOPICS AND READINGS

**Read the set texts in advance of seminars. In the weeks when you are presenting, you must read them more carefully than at other times, but you should always give enough time to this to be able to contribute to discussions and support those who are giving presentations or leading seminars.**

### Week 1: General Discussion

### Week 2: Contexts/Contextualizing Anthropology & Islam

This week we read a selection of pieces that are loosely linked by the themes of “Anthropology & Islam” (**Houston & McLoughlin**) and “stereotypes of Islam” (**Corbett**).

The article by **Hermansen** is a broad overview piece giving some empirical understanding of Islam’s situation as a world religion. There is no need to get on top of the theological and historical detail—the point is to get a sense of some points that we will carry with us through the course. In the first instance, it should enhance next week’s reading by Geertz.

Read all of these pieces, but pay the greatest attention to the points made by Corbett, Houston and McLoughlin.

Corbett, Rosemary R., 2015. Islamic “Fundamentalism”: The Mission Creep of an American Religious Metaphor. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83(4): 977 – 1004.

Hermansen, Marcia, 2014. Conversion to Islam in Theological & Historical Perspectives. In Lewis R. Rambo & Charles E. Farhadian, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 40 pp.

Houston, Christopher, 2009. The Islam of Anthropology, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 20:198 – 212.

McLoughlin, Seán, 2007. Islam(s) in Context: Orientalism and the Anthropology of Muslim Societies and Cultures. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28(3): 273 – 96.

### Week 3: One Starting Point, Geertz

This tiny volume is widely treated as the foundational work in anthropological approaches to Islam and it is our point of departure. We return to it in our final fortnight, but you will keep it in mind throughout the course.

Like most foundational texts, this has been both widely lauded and criticized. It also shows its age, but it is an essential starting point, partly because so many works on Islam implicitly or explicitly respond to it and partly because, like all foundational works, it makes important points that remain valid.

We are not bothered with the specific ethnographic detail; rather, I want you to pick up on Geertz's core argument about the sociocultural nature of this religion so often described in the singular but lived in diverse historical, political and cultural contexts. The Eickelman piece is a reflection, some 30+ years later on Geertz and Islam by a favourable, but not devoted, commentator. It will make more sense if you read it after *Islam Observed*.

Geertz, Clifford, 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Eickelman, Dale, 2005. Clifford Geertz and Islam. In Richard A. Schweder & Bryon Good, eds, *Clifford Geertz by His Colleagues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 63 – 75.

### Weeks 4 – 5: Islam in New Places

This week we read the first of three ethnographies. In the US, as in other places, immigrants, Muslims and phenotypically dark-skinned people face profound discrimination. Abdulla's book, focused on West African immigrant Muslims to the US, covers a group who face all three kinds of oppression. In contrast to the broad generalizations about culture, place and Islam in Geertz's book, this one is a piece of focused thick description, taking us in-depth into a single case study, giving us a feel for how Islam plays out distinctively in this one area and showing how the particular outcomes arise from the interplay of religion, broader life experience and the wider society in which it occurs.

Abdulla, Zain, 2010. *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Week 4 Presenter/Class Leader: Deborah Prologue – Chapter 4**

**Week 5 Presenter/Class Leader: Benjamin Chapter 5 - Epilogue**

### Weeks 6 – 7: Islam and Gender

Gender, particularly women's status, is among the contentious political and scholarly issues and debates concerning Islam, which is why we cover it. This very complex set of issues is widely addressed and debated in disciplines including Anthropology, Development Studies, Gender Studies, Politics, Religious Studies and Sociology and by a wide range of Muslim scholars in different scholarly fields.

We look at just one in a plethora of ethnographies that we might have considered. Having read Abdullah's contemporary ethnography, we now turn to second classic, this one by Fatima Mernissi (d.2015), a Moroccan feminist Muslim anthropologist and sociologist. Mernissi casts a critical gaze on the ways in which (some) Islam became entangled in forms of gender oppression and asks how religion, ideological justification and social practice relate to each other.

Mernissi, Fatima, 2011 [1975]. *Beyond the Veil: Male – Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*. London: Saqi Books

**Week 6 Presenter/Class Leader: Imogen.** Intro to Revised Edition, Preface, Intro, Part One

**Week 7 Presenter/Class Leader: Batara.** Part Two, Conclusion.

## **Week 8: Islam, Gender Politics & Scholarship**

Like Geertz's early account, Mernissi's has been subject to both celebration and critique. Since its publication there has also been an enormous amount written about how politically-positioned scholars might approach gender questions. We take a look at a small selection of them, focusing on feminism, orientalism and Muslim women's practice.

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783 – 790.

Chapman, Madeleine, 2016. Feminist Dilemmas and the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women: Analysing Identities and Social Representations. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 23(3): 237 – 50.

Deeb, Lara, 2009. Piety politics and the Role of a Transnational Feminist Analysis. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15: S112 – S126.

Jacobsen, Christine M., 2011. Troublesome Threesome: Feminism, Anthropology & Muslim Women's Piety. *Feminist Review* 98: 65 – 82.

## **Weeks 9 – 10: Islam, Embodiment & Media**

Our final ethnography turns to matters of media, embodiment and belief among young Muslim men in urban Egypt. There has been a significant growth of disciplinary interest in Islamic media over the last decade or so, part of a growth of interest in religious media more widely, so this is just one approach to the topic.

Hirschkind, Charles, 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. NY: Columbia University Press.

**Week 9 Presenter/Class Leader: David.** Intro – Chapter 3

**Week 10 Presenter/Class Leader:**

## **Weeks 11 – 12: And Back to Anthropology & Islam...**

Finally, we return to questions raised at the beginning of the course to consider one view on how well the discipline deals with this complex religion. Varisco takes a look at disciplinary developments and changing anthropological interests and approaches, paying particular attention to a few of the “big names” (Geertz, Gellner, Mernissi & Ahmed) before asking about the value and scope of anthropological engagements with the religion. You should read the book as a critique in the Hegelian sense (which we will talk about as we go along) and consider how valid you find Varisco's argument about the value and limitations of ethnographic approaches to the religion.

Varisco, Daniel Martin, 2005. *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation*. Contemporary Anthropology of Religion. NY: Palgrave Macmillan