

The Emergence of Islam – How to Teach with This Book

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Challenges

Instructors teaching a course on the Qur'an, Muhammad, or Islam in a university setting will encounter a number of challenges (and hopefully an equal number of rewards!):

1. "What do Muslims believe about X?"

Students in courses on Islam often ask questions like, "What do Muslims believe about X?" The concern for the perspective of believers is especially prominent in courses on Islam. Many students know about Islam only through news reports on controversial issues involving fundamentalism. To such students a course on Islam is often seen as an occasion to figure out what Muslims "really believe" or, what Islam "really teaches," about those issues.

In response to (or in anticipation of) such questions, instructors might help students appreciate the difference between theology and religious studies. The question of what Islam "really teaches" is a theological question. The development of religious doctrines on any matter (from food laws to the headscarf to just war) involves a process by which believers reflect rationally on (what they consider to be) divinely revealed sources (in the case of Islam, the Qur'an and the hadith). An outsider to this theological process can only properly observe that Islam "really teaches" whatever Muslims – who participate in this process -- conclude that it teaches. For someone outside of this process to adjudicate its proper conclusion (that is, for a professor in a religious studies course to decide what the true teaching of Islam is on any given matter) will necessarily involve an essentialization of Islam. Instructors might add that in the case of Islam – which has no centralized teaching body such as the magisterium of Roman Catholicism – it is especially important not to give simplistic answers on the "true teaching" of Islam.

Still, students need not despair about the prospects of understanding Islam. Instructors might also point out that all lived religious traditions necessarily have an internally coherent doctrinal system. Accordingly, questions on what Islam "really teaches" can often be opportunities to introduce the logic of that process by which Islamic doctrine is developed. For example, in response to a question of what Islam "really teaches" about the rights of Jews and Christians (or believers of other traditions, or atheists), instructors might:

- first, present relevant verses from the Qur'an (such as 2:62 and 9:29), while explaining how these verses are read by Muslim scholars (for example, by placing them into chronological order

according to the Prophet Muḥammad's biography), and relevant hadith (or chapters or hadith collections);

- second, explain how Muslim jurists produce legal opinions (*fatwas*) by reflecting on both of these sources of revelation. Students might learn to recognize the authority of revelation in Islam, the role of reason in Islamic jurisprudence, and the various complications and ambiguities in the process of Islamic doctrinal development. This should lead them to a sympathetic appreciation of the system by which Muslims develop religious teaching (even if they might not agree with a particular *fatwa*).

There is a tendency in the academy to highlight liberal Muslim voices on questions involving human rights and religious freedom. Instructors often see this approach as a means of encouraging students to approach Islam with greater sympathy. However, they may imply thereby that "true Muslims" are liberal Muslims, and that more liberal voices/perspectives on any particular doctrine are more authentic. This sort of approach often inhibits students from appreciating the larger system of doctrinal development in Islam, and generally leads students to judge more traditional/conservative Islamic views as irrational. In this way instructors can muddle the thinking of their students on the very issues which the course is seeking to clarify (and enable students to develop sympathy for only certain types of Muslims).

II. "What do we really know about X?"

Students in courses on Islam also ask questions like, "What do we really know about X?" This sort of question presents its own challenge, in this case because of the extraordinary conflict of scholarly views in the field of Islamic Studies. To begin with, scholars are divided over the historical reliability of the biography of Muḥammad – and the relationship of the Qur'an to that biography.

According to the majority of scholars, the traditional biography is accurate in its broad outlines. These scholars may not accept the supernatural episodes therein (for example, that Muḥammad split the moon in two) but they do accept the basic features of Muhammad's life: for example, that he was born in Mecca around AD 570 and migrated to Medina around AD 622. Such scholars, however, are not necessarily in agreement over their judgment of Muḥammad's character. Polemical scholars may portray Muhammad as a vindictive warlord by focusing on (what they see as) unseemly episodes in the traditional story (Muhammad's multiple marriages, his raids, the massacre of the tribe of Banu Qurayza, and the executions of Jews at Khaybar). Apologetical scholars may portray Muhammad as something of a saint or a guru by focusing on reports of his concern for justice towards orphans and widows, his hospitality towards non-Muslims, and his personal asceticism. Still others take a sober approach and portray Muhammad as a shrewd statesman or diligent social reformer.

Challenging the traditional biography of Muhammad

Meanwhile, a minority of scholars argue that the traditional biography is unreliable even in its broad outlines. These scholars contend that the story of Muḥammad's life was written in the medieval period by scholars who told stories about the Prophet Muḥammad in order to explain ambiguous or poorly understood passages in the Qur'an and to find an Arabian context for the origins of Islam (which might then be presented as an Ishmaelite/Abrahamic religion, free from Jewish or Christian influence).

If this second group of scholars are right, then most of the information found in introductory books on Islam is wrong. The stories about Muḥammad's birth in Mecca, his call to prophethood, his conflict with the pagans, his migration to Medina, his raids and conflicts with the Jews there, his wives and his companions, and his death, are more literature than history. Only the Qur'an (among Islamic sources) can be seen as an authentic witness to the life of the Prophet (although ancient non-Islamic sources might be consulted). And inasmuch as the Qur'an is more a work of religious exhortation than of documentary history, our answers to "What do we really know about X?" will be rather general.

In an introductory class on Islam, students should be made aware of these various scholarly positions, and understand how each position is articulated. *The Emergence of Islam* was written with this goal in mind.

III. Shi'ite and Sunni perspectives

The particular perspectives of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims on Islam's emergence present a unique challenge to instructors. In some ways the very identity of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims is defined by those perspectives. To be a Shi'ite is to believe that God willed, and Muhammad proclaimed, that 'Ali was to assume leadership of the Islamic community after Muhammad's death (and therefore that Abu Bakr's rule was illegitimate). To be a Sunni involves, among other things, the denial of this belief. The standard resolution to this problem is simply to recount the Sunni perspective of Islam's emergence (presumably because Sunnis are the majority community). Indeed, some introductory books portray Islam as its origins as "Sunni." Shi'ism is treated as a later offshoot, or (even worse) a sect.

The problem with this portrayal is that it is wrong. Sunni Islam developed only when certain collections of hadith were recognized as a second source of revelation and used for the development of religious and legal doctrine. This development occurred only in the ninth century (when the earliest of those collections are compiled), about the same time that the doctrines of that distinguish Shi'ism developed. Thus we cannot properly speak of Sunni *or* Shi'ite Islam at the origins of Islam. We can, however, present Sunni and Shi'ite perspectives on Islam's origins. *The Emergence of Islam* helps instructors do just that.

IV. Contesting the category of “Abrahamic religions”

The central figures in the Bible appear also in the Qur’an. Accordingly instructors might think of these figures – whether Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, or Mary – as characters “shared” by Christians and Muslims (and in some cases Jews).

The recent, and widespread, adoption of the category of “Abrahamic religions” seems to imply that Abraham, at least, is a figure that unites three religions. However, in an academic setting instructors should encourage their students to think carefully about such categories. Jews and Christians do not consider the Qur’an and the hadith (where Muslims learn about Abraham) to be revealed texts; Muslims do not consider the Bible (where Jews and Christians learn about Abraham) to be a revealed text. Accordingly, there are profound differences between the Abraham of Islam and the Abraham of the Bible. The Abraham of Islam leaves Sarah and Isaac to travel with Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca where he builds the Ka’ba and performs the rites of the Islamic pilgrimage. The Abraham of the Bible does no such thing.

The differences in regard to Jesus are even more profound. The Jesus of the Qur’an is not the Christian Jesus; he is not “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (according to the standard interpretation of the Qur’an, Jesus did not die on the cross at all). Indeed, the Jesus of the Qur’an preaches *against* Christians, accusing them of holding false beliefs.

In other words, the relationship of Judaism or Christianity with Islam on “shared characters” is unlike the relationship between Judaism and Christianity on such matters. Jews and Christians share a book (the Hebrew Bible); the only Noah, Abraham, or Moses whom they know are the Noah, Abraham, and Moses of the Bible. Of course, Jews and Christians disagree over the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible (and the legitimacy of the New Testament). Yet this is a different sort of disagreement from that which Muslims have with Jews and Christians over “shared characters.”

Thus Instructors should help students avoid truisms in this regard. Even more, by illustrating the unique nature of characters such as Abraham in Jesus in Islam, instructors might introduce students to Islam’s unique perspective on religious history, and to the historical development of Islamic doctrine in a context of religious rivalry.

How to Use *The Emergence of Islam*

On the Fortress website (www.fortresspress.com/reynolds) you will find a sample syllabus for a twelve-week course, along with suggestions on how that syllabus might be expanded for a longer course or serve as a guide for designing a shorter module focused on Islam or early Islam within a broader course. At the opening of that document, I include a paragraph with general suggestions on other textbooks, primary sources, and readers that might supplement *The Emergence of Islam* (and some of these resources are integrated into the sample syllabus itself). On the website you will also find a document

covering online resources, which includes links – categorized and annotated – to websites that might be integrated into class plans or made available to students for their research.

In a course or module centered on *The Emergence of Islam*, instructors might regularly integrate into class discussions the study questions at the end of each chapter, along with the related primary sources quoted in the text. Before proceeding with a study of the traditional narrative of Islamic origins (Part 1), it may be helpful to discuss the scholarly debate surrounding the proper approach to the study of Islam's emergence. Instructors might ask students to read the Preface, the page-long introduction to "The Family Tree of the Prophet Muhammad According to the Traditional Biography" and the Introduction to Part 1 in advance of such a discussion.

Thereafter instructors might turn to a study of the traditional narrative. For this section of the course instructors might assign chapters 1-3, and the conclusion to Part 1, as reading. In class it will be helpful to refer to "The Family Tree" chart to lead discussions on:

- the importance of the Abrahamic lineage of Muhammad
- the particular Shi'ite and Sunni perspectives on the members of the Prophet's household and the early leaders of the Islamic empire.

The Introduction to Part 2 might serve instructors as an important reading to bridge the two sections of the book. The discussion of the hadith (and the primary source from Shafi'i about the hadith) there might help students develop a greater understanding of the importance of the traditional historical narrative of Islam's origins for the development of Islamic doctrine. At the same time this Introduction should illustrate to students that a scholarly approach to Islam's emergence can proceed quite differently when it begins with the Qur'an.

In covering Part 2 of *The Emergence of Islam*, instructors might shape class discussions on the particular themes of the chapters therein:

- the Qur'an's theological nature, its particular theological message, and its arguments for human repentance (chapter 4)
- the close conversation of the Qur'an with Biblical literature, and its distinctive use of Biblical traditions (chapter 5)
- the Qur'anic (or exegetical) origin of traditional historical reports about the Prophet, and the influence of religious competition in the medieval Islamic world on the development of those reports (chapter 6)
- Qur'anic evidence for the emergence of Islam, and the manner in which this evidence differs from the traditional historical narrative (chapter 7)

Part 3 of *The Emergence of Islam* will provide instructors with the opportunity to illustrate the manner in which Islamic teaching today is profoundly connected with the traditional understanding of Islam's origins. A discussion of *fatwas* -- perhaps using the examples offered in "From a Classic Text 8.1," or using an online fatwa website such as the one linked to in the online resources document -- can be a helpful manner of introducing this connection. In class discussions on Part 3 of the book, instructors might use the case studies in chapter 8 on Egypt, Pakistan, and Iran to divide the class into study groups to do research projects on Islam in one of those countries.

Finally, it may be helpful for instructors to remind students of the glossary of technical (and Arabic language) terms at the end of the book and to the resources, including links to important websites, under the student tab of the Fortress website. And please contact me via email with any questions or suggestions you may have (reynolds@nd.edu).