

Becoming 'Good' Muslims: Anthropological Perspectives on Contemporary Muslim Moralities

Undergraduate Elective
Dr. Shumaila Ahmed
Spring 2026

Lecture Time: Tues & Thurs 4-5:15 PM

Location: MCC-14 (G-27), AMAN CED, Main Campus

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Office: 207 Fauji Building

Office Hours: Tues & Thurs 5:15-6:15 PM and Thurs 12-2 PM or By Appointment

Shetaan waiting for me to end namaz
jaldi jaldi so we can continue
watching next episode on Netflix:



Course Description

This course is a deep ethnographic dive into how ordinary Muslims aspire and strive to live a 'good' Islamic life. It does not prescribe any specific notions of being a 'good' Muslim. Nor does it assume that all Muslims everywhere are concerned with being good Muslims. However, with the global rise of reformist and revivalist Islam from late 20th century onwards, an extensive body of anthropological work has emerged over the last few decades focussing on the ethics and politics of Muslims who articulate the desire and aim to live a good Islamic life.

In this course, we delve into ethnographies that address the moral aspirations and projects of Muslims as an empirical question across a range of geographical contexts from Pakistan to Indonesia, Egypt, Central Asia, Turkey and Western Europe. We examine how diverse groups of Muslims- from Deobandis to Sufis and Shias to Salafis among others- understand, imagine, debate, and practice Islam, what their hopes and aspirations for themselves and their communities are, what moral conflicts and dilemmas they experience, and how these lived experiences and political-ethical projects might be compared cross-culturally. Along the way, we will analytically locate Muslim moral striving within contemporary debates on Islam's relationship to liberal-secularism, feminism, the market, state, neoliberalism and new media.

Course Objectives

- Analyze how Muslim subjectivities are shaped by various factors including religious authority, Islamic texts, everyday concerns, social contexts, and historical processes.
- Utilize key concepts and methods from the anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of ethics to examine the formation and expression of Muslim selves.

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- Examine how Muslims negotiate ethical dilemmas and cultivate ethical selves in engagement not only with the Islamic tradition but also liberal-secularism, feminism, the market, state, neoliberalism and new media.
- Critically analyze ethnographic studies of Muslims to understand the lived experiences and diverse expressions of Islamic subjectivities.

Course Outcomes

- Students will develop a deeper understanding of the ethical lives of Muslims and appreciate the complexities and nuances of their moral experiences.
- Students will be able to analyze and differentiate key concepts such as ethics, morality, religion, and tradition, and understand their intersections in the context of contemporary Muslim experience.
- Students will become familiar with anthropological theories and methods used to study ethics and morality in Muslim societies, including ethnography, fieldwork, and cross-cultural comparison.
- Students will recognize the diversity of ethical expressions and practices among Muslims across different cultures, regions, and historical periods.
- Students will critically examine how cultural and social factors shape ethical understandings and practices within Muslim communities.
- Students will be able to critically evaluate anthropological research on Islamic ethics, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and potential biases.
- Students will develop their own ethical awareness and sensitivity, recognizing the importance of cultural relativism and ethical pluralism.

Course Outline

I strongly encourage you to engage with core readings both prior to and after class. This is where AI might actually be used wisely- we will discuss this more when we meet in the first week. Supplementary readings for those who might be interested in exploring a specific topic in greater depth; I will also draw on these in lecture PowerPoints and discussions. ALL CORE READINGS WILL BE UPLOADED TO AN LMS FOLDER TITLED ‘COURSE READINGS’ (can it get more obvious than that?!)

For each quiz and other in-class assessments, I will specify EXACTLY which readings and PowerPoints to prepare from.

I advise you to regularly revisit this syllabus, especially the description of each week’s topic- it will serve as your navigator as we descend into the mayhem of term time, quizzes, deadlines, and all the other *more important things* that students must devote their precious time to.

Week 1 Approaching Morality/Ethics as an Analytical Problem – not a Moral One	
This week introduces how anthropology studies ethics and morality analytically rather than normatively. We examine ethics as embedded in everyday practices, narratives, and judgments, rather than as abstract rules or prescriptions. The goal is to unsettle common-sense understandings of “ethics” and prepare students to analyze moral life ethnographically.	
Core Reading	Supplementary Reading
Laidlaw, J. 2014. ‘Beyond the Science of Unfreedom.’ In <i>The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom</i> .	Mattingly, C. 2012. ‘Moral Selves and Moral Scenes: Narrative Experiments in Everyday Life.’ <i>Ethnos</i> , 78(3), 301.
Lambek, M. 2015. ‘Living as If It Mattered.’ In <i>Four Lectures on Ethics: Anthropological Perspectives</i> .	Das, V. 2015. ‘What Does Ordinary Ethics Look Like?’ In <i>Four Lectures on Ethics: Anthropological Perspectives</i> .

Week 2 Studying Islam as a 'Lived' Tradition

We explore Islam as a historically grounded, discursive, and lived tradition, rather than a fixed set of beliefs or doctrines. The readings introduce key anthropological approaches to Islam that emphasize practice, interpretation, and debate, and consider how Muslims engage ethical questions within-and sometimes against-Islamic traditions.

Core Reading

Asad, T. 1986. 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam.' *Occasional Papers Series*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University.

Schielke, S. 2019. 'The Power of God: Four Proposals for an Anthropological Engagement.' *Programmatic Texts*, no. 13: 1–20.

Supplementary Reading

Rasanayagam, J. 2018. 'Anthropology in conversation with an Islamic tradition: Emmanuel Levinas and the practice of critique.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 24(1), 90-106.

Week 3 Piety as an Ethical Project

This week examines piety as a deliberate ethical project through which Muslims seek to cultivate moral selves and social order. We analyze how piety is embedded in hierarchies, authority, and everyday discipline, and consider the political and ethical implications of reformist and revivalist Islamic movements.

Core Reading

Khan, A. 2024. 'Introduction: Islam, Hierarchy, and Moral Order.' In *The Promise of Piety: Islam and the Politics of Moral Order in Pakistan*, 1-25.

Supplementary Reading

Mahmood, S. 2005. 'Introduction.' In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 118-140.

Week 4 "Everyday Islam"

Building on earlier weeks, we turn to critiques of overly piety-centered approaches by focusing on everyday moral life, inconsistency, and ambivalence. These readings highlight how Muslims navigate ethical aspirations alongside pleasure, compromise, failure, and doubt, complicating singular models of moral selfhood.

Core Reading

Schielke, S. and Debevec, L. 2012. 'Introduction.' In S. Schielke and L. Debevec (eds.), *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, 1–16.

Schielke, S. 2009. 'Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15 (S1): S24–40.

Supplementary Reading

Schielke, S. 2010. 'Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life.' Working Papers, 2. Zentrum Moderner Orient.

Fadil, N. & Fernando, M. 2015. 'Rediscovering the "everyday" Muslim. Notes on an anthropological divide.' *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5 (2):59–88.

Week 5 - 6 Gender

These weeks examine gender as a central site of ethical labor, moral exemplarity, and contestation in Muslim societies. Through diverse ethnographic cases, we explore women's religious authority, domestic piety, feminist critique, queer religious lives, and the ways gendered bodies become key terrains for negotiating morality, tradition, and secular norms.

Core Reading**Supplementary Reading**

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<p>Khan, A. 2024. ‘Certain Faith, The Pious Home, And the Path to an Islamic Future.’ Ch. 5 In <i>The Promise of Piety</i>, 129-154.</p> <p>Hill, J. 2018. ‘Wrapping.’ Ch. 3 In <i>Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal</i>, 107-131</p> <p>Pamment, C. ‘On the Other Side of the Rainbow? Khwaja Sira Pieties, Politics, Performances and the Tablighi Jama’at in Pakistan.’ In <i>Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere</i>.</p> <p>Piraino, F. 2024. ‘A female imam in Paris: Islam, gender, and secular normativity.’ <i>Culture and Religion</i>, 24(2), 205–225.</p> <p>Documentary on the hijab protests in Iran</p>	<p>Sehlikoglu, S. 2017. ‘Revisited: Muslim Women’s Agency and Feminist Anthropology of the Middle East.’ <i>Cont Islam</i>. Springer.</p> <p>Mahmood, S. 2005. ‘Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject.’ In <i>Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject</i>, 118-140.</p> <p>Deeb, L. 2006. <i>An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’i Lebanon</i>. Princeton, NJ: University Press.</p> <p>Zafar-Ahmed, S. Work in Progress. ‘Gendered Doubt under Racialised Scrutiny: Muslim Women, Feminist Critique, and Moral Exemplars in Britain’</p>
<p>Week 7 Religious Authority</p> <p>Now we look at religious authority as something produced, mediated, and negotiated, rather than simply inherited or imposed. Through ethnographies of women religious leaders, media technologies, fatwas, and digital influencers, we explore how Islamic ethical authority is shaped through everyday practices of teaching, performance, interpretation, and mediation. The readings foreground how gender, technology, and new communicative forms reconfigure who can speak authoritatively about Islam, how religious knowledge circulates, and how ethical expertise is recognized and contested.</p>	
<p>Core Reading</p>	<p>Supplementary Reading</p>
<p>Hill, J. 2018. ‘Cooking Up Spiritual Leadership.’ Ch. 5 In <i>Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal</i>, 167-191.</p> <p>Moll, Y. 2018. ‘Television Is Not Radio: Theologies of Mediation in the Egyptian Islamic Revival.’ <i>Cultural Anthropology</i> 33(2): 221–248.</p> <p>Documentary on female imams in Europe</p>	<p>Agrama, H.A. 2010. ‘Ethics, Authority, Tradition: Towards an Anthropology of the Fatwa.’ <i>American Ethnologist</i>, vol. 37, no. 1, 2010, pp. 2-18.</p> <p>Franke, L. M. 2024. ‘Alternatives to Conveying Religious Knowledge: Islamic Influencers – Insights from Egypt.’ In <i>Digital Islam and Everyday Life in the Middle East</i>, edited by Tanja B. Müller and Philip Schröter, 121–138.</p>
<p>Week 8-9 Sufism</p> <p>These weeks explore Sufism as a diverse set of ethical, social, and political practices, rather than a singular mystical tradition. Through ethnographic accounts across different regions, we explore how Sufi lives and institutions are shaped by discipline and devotion, charisma and hierarchy, intimacy and authority, as well as uncertainty and ethical struggle. The readings show how Sufi practices are embedded in everyday social worlds and historical conditions, complicating both reformist critiques of Sufism and Orientalist portrayals of it as purely spiritual or apolitical.</p>	
<p>Core Reading</p>	<p>Supplementary Reading</p>
<p>Ewing, K. P. 2006 [1997]. ‘The <i>Qalandar</i> Confronts the Proper Muslim.’ In <i>Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam</i>, 201-229.</p>	<p>Luow, M. 2018. ‘Haunting as Moral Engine: Ethical Striving and Moral Aporias among Sufis in Uzbekistan.’ In <i>Moral Engines: Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life</i>, 83-99.</p>

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<p>Ewing, K. P. 2006 [1997]. ‘A Pir’s Life Story.’ In <i>Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam</i>, 128-162.</p> <p>Mittermaier, A. 2019. ‘Caravan to Paradise.’ Ch 3. In <i>Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times</i>, 74-104.</p>	<p>Vicini, F. 2020. ‘Reading, Reflection, and the Search for Transcendence.’ In <i>Reading Islam: Life and Politics of Brotherhood in Modern Turkey</i>. Leiden: Brill, 2020.</p>
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Week 10-11 Secularism

We turn now to secularism and study it not as the absence of religion, but as a disciplinary, affective, and embodied project. We analyze how Muslim bodies, emotions, and practices become sites of anxiety and governance in secular contexts, particularly in Europe, and how secular norms reshape religious ethical life. We also examine the entanglements of Islam with the modern state, focusing on law, violence, blasphemy, and moral injury.

Core Reading

Supplementary Reading

Fadil et al. 2019. ‘Secular Embodiments: Mapping an Emergent Field.’ In *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations*, 1-16.

Burchardt, M. and Grier, M. 2019. ‘Secular Affect and Urban Exclusion: Feelings about Burkas in Public Spaces.’ In *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations*, 185-198.

Bilal, M. 2024. *Beyond the Law: Living Blasphemy in Pakistan: Ethnography of Mundane Violence, Faith, and Lifeworlds*.

Asad, T. et al. 2024. *Formations of the Secular 20 Years On*. *Current Anthropology* 65(S20): S1–S37.

Hirschkind, C. 2011. “Is There a Secular Body?” *Cultural Anthropology* 26(4): 633–647.

Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press (selected chapters).

Theobald, S. 2023. ‘The perils of utopia: Between ‘ethical static’ and moral perfectionism in Iran.’ *Critique of Anthropology*.

Week 12 Care and Relational Ethics

This week focuses on Islamic ethics as care, obligation, and relational practice, emphasizing how moral life is sustained through attention to others rather than individual self-cultivation alone. The readings explore how Muslims navigate vulnerability, displacement, and uncertainty, highlighting ethical endurance and responsibility in everyday life.

Basit, K. I. 2024. *The Dread Heights: Tribulation and Refuge after the Syrian Revolution*. Fordham University Press.

Mittermaier, A. 2019. ‘Caravan to Paradise.’ Ch 3. In *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*, 74-104.

Week 13 Islam, Market, Civic Virtue

This week explores how Islamic ethics intersect with capitalism, neoliberal governance, and civic projects. Through ethnographies of work, self-improvement, and public virtue, we analyze how Islamic moral languages are mobilized to produce productive workers, ethical citizens, and cosmopolitan selves.

Core Reading

Supplementary Reading

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<p>Khan, S. 2022. "Market-Friendly Muslims: Cultivating Piety without Sacrificing Capitalism." <i>The Maydan</i>, January 18, 2022 https://themaydan.com/2022/01/market-friendly-muslims-cultivating-piety-without-sacrificing-capitalism/</p> <p>Hoesterey, J. B. 2012. 'Prophetic Cosmopolitanism: Islam, Pop Psychology, and Civic Virtue in Indonesia.' <i>Cultural Anthropology</i>, 27(1), 38–61.</p>	<p>Vicini, F. 2019. 'Putting Islam to Work.' In <i>Reading Islam: Life and Politics of Brotherhood in Modern Turkey</i>, 85-107.</p> <p>Rudnyckyj, D. 2009. 'Spiritual Economies: Islam and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia.' <i>Cultural Anthropology</i>. 24(1), 104–141.</p>
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Week 14 Concluding Thoughts + Poster Conference
 In the final week, students reflect on the course’s central themes and present their visual ethnography projects. We collectively revisit what it means to study Muslim moral life anthropologically and consider how ethics, piety, ambivalence, power, and aspiration have been rethought across the semester.

Assessment & Grading

These dates are subject to change at the instructor’s discretion. Students will be informed in advance. Detailed guidelines for all assignments as well as class participation will be uploaded on LMS by week 2.

Assessments	Deadline (Exact date TBC)	Weightage
Quiz 1(In-class)	Week 5	20%
Quiz 2 (In-class)	Week 9	20%
Quiz 3 (In-class)	Week 12	20%
Research Proposal	Week 10	5%
Research Paper	Week 14	15%
Poster Conference + Presentation (In-class)	Week 14	10%
Class attendance, conduct, and participation	n/a	10%

**N-1 quiz will be conducted as bonus questions in Quiz 2 and Quiz 3.
 THERE WILL BE NO MAKE-UPS OR ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENTS AVAILABLE
 OUTSIDE THESE ASSIGNMENTS.**