

Becoming 'Good' Muslims: An Anthropological Lens

Undergraduate Elective
Dr. Shumaila Ahmed
Spring 2025



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.
- 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

Week 1 Openings

Session 1

Introduction to the course

Session 2

Ali, J. A. 2023. 'Introduction to Special Issue: Islamic Revivalism and Social Transformation in the Modern World.' *Religions*, 14(7), 899.

Week 2 Studying Islam and Muslims- Building up a Conceptual Vocabulary

Session 3

Ortner, S. B. 2005. 'Subjectivity and cultural critique.' *Anthropological Theory*, 5(1), 31–52.

Session 4

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

Week 3 Cultivating Islamic Piety

Session 5

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

Session 6

Khan, A. 2024. *The Promise of Piety: Islam and the Politics of Moral Order in Pakistan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (Selected Chapters).

Week 4 Piety and Gender

Session 7

Mahmood, S. 2005. 'Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject.' In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, 118-140. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Session 8

McBrien, J. 2010. 'Mukadas's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan.' In *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*, edited by Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares, 121-137. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Week 5 Too Much Islam in the Anthropology of Islam? Islamic Piety vs. Everyday Islam

Session 9

Schielke, S. 2010. Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life. *ZMO Working Papers*, 2 <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/32233>

Session 10

Montgomery, D. W. 2007. 'Namaz, Wishing Trees, and Vodka: The Diversity of Everyday Religious Life in Central Asia.' In *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, edited by J. Sahadeo and R. Zanca. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 355-370.

Week 6 Negotiating Religious Authority

Session 11

Marsden, M. 2005. *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 6: Scholars and scoundrels: Rowshan's amulet-making 'ulama)

Session 12

Agrama, H.A. 2010. 'Ethics, Authority, Tradition: Towards an Anthropology of the Fatwa.' *American Ethnologist*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2010, pp. 2-18.

Week 7 Televangelists and TikTokers: Islam and New Media

Session 13

Moll, Yasmin. 2010. 'Islamic Televangelism: Religion, Media and Visuality in Contemporary Egypt.' *Arab Media & Society*, no. 10.

Session 14

Franke, L. M. 2024. 'Alternatives to Conveying Religious Knowledge: Islamic Influencers – Insights from Egypt.' In *Digital Islam and Everyday Life in the Middle East*, edited by Tanja B. Müller and Philip Schröter, 121–138. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Week 8 & 9 Connecting with the Divine: Sufism as ethics and politics

Session 15-18

Vicini, F. 2020. 'Reading, Reflection, and the Search for Transcendence.' In *Reading Islam: Life and Politics of Brotherhood in Modern Turkey*. Leiden: Brill, 2020.

Ewing, K. 2020. *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond*, co-edited with Rosemary C. Corbett, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020 (Selected Chapters).

Further readings to be included.

Week 10 Can We Have Fun as Good Muslims? Navigating Values

Session 19

Deeb, L. 2013. *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating geography and morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*. (Chapters 1 & 2)

Session 20

Marsden, M. 2005. *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 5: Mahfils and musicians: new Muslims in Markaz).

Week 11 Muslim and Secular? More Questions on Values

Session 21

Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press (Chapter 2).

Session 22

Scheer, M., Nadia F., and Birgitte S. J. (eds.). 2020. *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations*. London: Bloomsbury Academic (Selected Chapters).

Week 12 Commodification and Neoliberal Muslim Selfhood

Session 23

Rudnyckyj, D. 2009. ‘Spiritual Economies: Islam and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia.’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 24(1), 104–141.

Session 24

Jones, C. 2007. ‘Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia.’ *Fashion Theory* 11(2/3): 211–32.

Week 13 Being a Good Muslim Citizen: Civic Virtue and Islam

Session 25

Hoesterey, J. B. 2012. ‘Prophetic Cosmopolitanism: Islam, Pop Psychology, and Civic Virtue in Indonesia.’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(1), 38–61.

Session 26

Vicini, F. 2019. ‘Putting Islam to Work.’ In *Reading Islam: Life and Politics of Brotherhood in Modern Turkey*, 85-107. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Week 14 Concluding Thoughts

Assessment & Grading

Assessments	Deadline	Marks (Total 100)
Quiz 1	Week 3	10
Quiz 2	Week 6	20
Ethical autobiography (2500 words)	Week 8	20
Quiz 3	Week 11	10
Digital ethnography (4000 words)	TBA	30
Class attendance, conduct, and participation	n/a	10

Quiz

You will be examined on readings and class presentations from the first two weeks. The quiz will mainly consist of MCQs.

In-class midterm

You will be examined on readings and class presentations from the first six weeks. The midterm will mainly consist of MCQs and short answer questions.

Ethical autobiography (2500 words)

This assignment invites you to delve into the formation of your own ethical subjectivity by tracing the key influences and experiences that have shaped your moral life. By this point in the course you should have a good grasp of theories of ethical self-formation and the debates generated in anthropology by the use of this theoretical lens by Saba Mahmood and other Asadian scholars to understand Muslim religiosities. We would already have been dissecting readings and debates in class about the difficult questions raised about the dangers of exceptionalizing Muslim experience and ethical projects, about the fluidity and instability of the relationship between religious and secular values and the presence of moral dilemmas, failures, ethical crises, and hope in moral lives.

Approaching the reflection:

In this piece, you are invited to reflect on your own ethical self-formation. You can approach this by answering questions such as:

- What moral traditions shaped your early life?
- What role do norms and values from Islam and culture (local and global) play in your moral life today? Has this changed over time such as from your childhood?
- Do different values work together harmoniously to guide you? Or are there conflicts and uncertainties about what's good and right?
- How do you negotiate such value conflicts? What role does the body play in this? What emotions arise in the process?
- Do you have an ideal moral self in mind that you want to or already strive to become?

A good way to approach this piece would be to start from a particular instance in your life when you were faced with an ethical dilemma and what values you drew on (Islamic or otherwise) to shape your action? Or it could be an ongoing moral uncertainty that you feel about an everyday action or issue but do not have a definitive answer to.

Connecting the Personal and the theoretical: Weave together your personal reflections with the academic insights gained from the course.

- **Key Concepts:** Draw upon relevant concepts, theories, and debates explored in the course to analyze your ethical development.
- **Course Readings:** Incorporate insights from specific readings or case studies that have resonated with your personal narrative.
- **Contemporary Issues:** Connect your ethical reflections to contemporary issues related to Muslim subjectivities, ethics, and politics, such as social justice, gender equality, or religious freedom.

Assessment Criteria:

- **Depth of Reflection:** Demonstrate a sincere and insightful exploration of your ethical development.
- **Connection to Course Material:** Effectively integrate relevant concepts, theories, and readings from the course.
- **Clarity and Organization:** Present your narrative in a clear, well-structured, and engaging manner.
- **Critical Analysis:** Go beyond mere description by critically analyzing the factors that have shaped your ethical framework.
- **Grammar and Mechanics:** Maintain a high standard of academic writing, including proper grammar, punctuation, and citation format.

Digital Ethnography (4000 words)

This assignment challenges you to conduct digital ethnographic research to explore how Muslim moral subjectivities are constructed, negotiated, and expressed in online spaces. **Pairing up with another person in class**, you will choose an online community or platform relevant to the course themes and analyze its dynamics through the lens of anthropological theory as well as compare your findings to the ethnography discussed in class.

Project Components

Selection of Online Community/Platform: Choose an online space frequented by Muslims where moral discussions, debates, or expressions are prevalent. This could include:

- Social media groups or pages (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)
- Online forums or discussion boards
- Blogs or vlogs by Muslim individuals or communities

- Online religious platforms or apps

Justify your choice by explaining its relevance to the course themes and its potential for revealing insights into Muslim moral subjectivities.

Ethnographic Observation and Data Collection: Spend significant time immersed in the chosen online space, observing interactions, discussions, and shared content.

Collect data through various methods, such as:

- Taking screenshots of relevant posts, comments, or visual content
- Transcribing conversations or discussions
- Analyzing user profiles and online identities
- Documenting your own observations and reflections in a field journal

Analysis and Interpretation: Analyze the collected data through the lens of anthropological theories and concepts discussed in the course.

Consider the following questions:

- How are moral values and beliefs expressed and negotiated in this online space?
- What are the key themes and topics of moral discussion or debate?
- How do users construct and perform their Muslim identities in relation to moral issues?
- What are the power dynamics and social hierarchies within this online community?
- How does the digital environment shape the expression and interpretation of moral subjectivities?

Structure your paper to include:

- **Introduction:** Contextualize your research and state your main arguments.
- **Literature Review:** Connect your findings to relevant anthropological literature and course themes.
- **Methodology:** Describe your research methods and ethical considerations.
- **Findings:** Present your analysis of the online community and its moral dynamics.
- **Discussion:** Interpret your findings and analyse them in light of anthropological theories and debates on Muslim subjectivities.
- **Conclusion:** Summarize your key insights and suggest avenues for future research.