“Cultures and Religions of the Middle East”

Johnnie Hicks, Instructor

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“Cultures and Religions of the Middle East”
OLLI Class F653 – Fall 2013

Session #1 – September 18

- Welcome! Course overview; resources; structure for class sessions
- People, Places, Politics, and Perceptions in the “Middle East”
  - Identity of People across the region ... ethnicities, cultures, languages, religions
  - Importance of Place ... and “Sacred Geography”
  - Players of Politics and Power ... “state” and “non-state”
  - “Perceptions Are Everything!”

Session #2 – September 25

- Origins and basic concepts of Middle Eastern/Western religions
  - Zoroastrianism ... monotheism in the early Persian Empire
  - Children of Abraham ... Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
  - The Baha’i Faith ... youngest of the world's Western religions
- Understanding Islam (Part I)
  - Life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
  - Basic concepts and beliefs ... branches of Islamic traditions

Session #3 – October 2

- Understanding Islam (Part II)
- Understanding Arabs and “The Arab World”
  - Importance of bloodline, place, and religion
  - Cultural values and traditions among Arabs
- Who’s Who in the “The Arab World?”
- The “Arab Awakenings” ... writing new chapters in Arab histories

Session #4 – October 9

- Turks in the Middle East
  - Turkish migrations and rule in the Middle East
  - The 600-year rule of the Ottoman Turkish Empire
- Carving out countries of the modern “Middle East”
- Creation of the modern Republic of Turkey
  - Turkish cultures, religions, and evolving politics
  - Turkey as a “model” for the “Arab Awakenings”? 
Session #5 – October 16

- Understanding Iraq … “country with deep roots”
  - “In the beginning …” Biblical and historical origins
  - Who are the Iraqis? … ethnicities, religions, languages, and politics
  - Iraq’s unruly last century
- Impact of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq … wins, losses, and prospects for the future

Session #6 – October 23

- The Kurds and Kurdistan … history, homeland, and hopes
  - Ancient roots in the Zagros and Taurus mountains
  - Largest nation of people without a country
- Kurds in Turkey … Kurds in Iraq … Kurds in Iran … Kurds in Syria … Kurds in exile
  - ??? Dreams of a Kurdistan homeland … could it become a reality ???

Session #7 – October 30

- Who are the Persians … from ancient Persian Empire to the Islamic Republic of Iran
  - A glorious past, a troubled present, and an uncertain future
  - ‘Persian versions’ … cultures, traditions, and all things ‘Persian’!
  - Who are the Iranians … people, politics, and perceptions
- Iran, Israel, and the United States … an ever-shifting triangle
  - Significance of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the recent elections
  - “Talking to the enemy!” Would it help?

Session #8 – November 6

- Palestine and modern Israel … perceptions, promises, and perils
  - Creation of the state of Israel in Palestine
  - Perceptions, politics, and the 66-year old war
- Who are the Palestinians?
  - Historical and biblical roots in Canaan
  - Impact of “al-Nakba!”
- Who are the Israelis?
  - The Jewish dreams of Zionism … “Return to the Homeland!”
  - The allusive peace … why so hard?
- Class closure … reflections on class experiences … interests in follow-up?

Johnnie Hicks, OLLI Course Instructor
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"Cultures and Religions of the Middle East"

**OLLI Class F653 – Fall 2013**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARAB COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST</th>
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*Johnnie Hicks – 09/18/13*
Who Are the People of the “Middle East?”

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Capital</th>
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<td><strong>“Non-Arab” Countries</strong></td>
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<td>Iran</td>
<td>Teheran</td>
<td>Shi’ite Islam</td>
<td>Farsi</td>
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Note: Under current political and religious circumstances, many scholars and map makers also include Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of the “Greater Middle East.”

Johnnie Hicks – 09/18/2013
Understanding Cultures of the Middle East

General Background

- The term “Middle East” is a parochial term given to the area by European writers and politicians. People of this region generally refer to themselves by family or ethnic group; religion; language/culture; and sometimes, by country.

- “Middle East” cultures are defined by “collectivist groups” in society rather than “individualists” as defined in the West. People are organized in hierarchical relationships with leadership generally determined by age, gender, or tradition about who leads, who follows, and where one’s place is in the structure of the hierarchy.

- People of this region tend to feel they are “rooted” in certain geographic regions and feel deeply drawn to particular areas, especially where family ancestors lived and are buried. Some feel they are not fully “whole” when away from these familiar mountains, rivers, deserts, or plateaus. The Arabic word for this emotionally personal place is “bayt” (“be-longing”).

- Family histories are often rooted in ancient origins. Ancestral stories are passed on through art forms of storytelling, poetry, music, dance, performances, etc. People generally identify themselves by wearing certain pieces of clothing or headgear, eating favorite foods, celebrating ethnic holidays and traditions, and often, participating in a particular means of livelihood (farming, sheep raising, carpet weaving, leather crafting, etc.).

- Along with family bloodlines, religion is a vital part of one’s identity. Almost everyone is “religious,” though intensity varies from almost secular to ultra-conservative. About 90% of people living in the “Middle East” identify with some form of Islam. Christian populations have dwindled over the last few years, though Christianity had been the majority religion in Lebanon for many years. Along with Christians, the Jews, Zoroastrians, and a few others make up the remaining 10% of religious populations.

- Among Muslims in the “Middle East,” about 85% practice some form of Sunni Islam; of the remaining 15%, about 12% are Shi’a Muslims or are members of newer branches of the Sunni and Shi’a traditions. Sufism comes from both Sunni and Shi’a traditions.

- Since Friday is the Holy Day for Muslims, the “Middle East” week begins on Saturday and ends mid-day on Thursday (some on Wednesday evening). Jews still observe the Sabbath on Saturday.
Important Cultural Values and Worldviews

- People in the “Middle East” generally think of themselves in terms of “We-People” (as compared to “I-People” of the West). This means that individuals tend to downplay their own personal needs and wants in order to do what is best for their group. (See attachment: Understanding ‘I-People’ vs. ‘We-People’)

- Bloodlines are very important and often reflected in people’s names. For example: “Fatima um Hamed” is “Fatima, mother of Hamed;” “Mohammad bin Ali” is “Mohammad, son of Ali.” Family names are the source of great pride and should always be pronounced correctly.

- Issues of “pride” and “avoidance of shame” are critical aspects of “Middle Eastern” cultures. One must try, at all times, to avoid being in a position of “shame,” as this will be reflected on all members of one’s family or group.

- Dignity, honor, generosity, and loyalty are all of paramount importance, as these values are seen to relate to the whole family. Piety is a very important trait of human character; therefore, one must behave at all times in a manner that creates a good impression on others.

- Most people believe in the strong workings of “fate,” meaning that human beings do not try to assume too much control over life’s events. Therefore, “Ensha-Allah” (“If God wills”) is expressed when talking about anything in the future.

- One’s personal status of family membership is generally determined at birth and remains throughout one’s lifetime. Social status is also generally determined and will be a major factor in future arranged marriages. “Who one is” is often seen as more important than “What one does” (“Being” vs. “Doing”)

- Most people of the “Middle East” believe in the workings of “jinn” in their lives. They seek to attract good “jinn” and take precautions to avoid bad “jinn” (also known as “the evil eye”). It is common to see amulets such as blue beads or pieces of jewelry on children and special beads carried by men and boys. People avoid speaking of certain conditions, such as death, so as not to draw the attention of “the evil eye.”

- And, finally, “Middle Eastern” people hold a very high place in their lives for expressing and receiving hospitality! This cultural value is second to none. No food is too scarce, no sacrifice too high, and no effort is spared to welcome even strangers into one’s home for a lavish feast! One should never refuse an offer... nor fail to reciprocate in time. (Remember: Always use the right hand only when eating!)
Understanding “I-People” vs. “We-People”

Generally “individualists” (“I-People”) tend to:

- View “the individual” as building blocks of society; values “individualism”
- Reject the idea of “fate” and feel they have a great deal of control over their own lives, as well as over the natural environment
- Plan for “the future” and securing one’s own place in the world; view “change” over “tradition” as desirable and inevitable
- Prefer “independence” and self-help rather than relying on others
- Value “action over being” and earning one’s own reputation and worth by “what one does”
- Value “competition” and free enterprise and seek personal success
- Have interests in several “in-groups” made up of different people such as one’s neighborhood, work or professional group, religious community, and other social/professional affiliations

Generally “collectivists” (“We-People”) tend to:

- View “the group” as basic units of society; self-identity comes through group identity with others such as family, tribe, ancestors, or religious group; values “hierarchical relationships”
- Hold to a worldview of “fate” or the “supernatural” having more control over their lives; sense more reverence for the natural environment
- Value traditions of “the past;” prefer “tradition” over rapid change; live more for “the present” and view “the future” with less certainty
- Prefer “interdependence” and sharing resources and cooperative reliance with others
- Value “being over action” and emphasize character building reputation by “who one is”
- Value “cooperation” and social harmony; seek to have collective successes
- Have fewer “in-groups” ... perhaps only one ... and feel more enmeshed with each other’s lives; important to remain loyal over time; tendencies to be suspicious of outsiders to one’s own group

Ideas from Harry C. Triandis: *Intercultural Skills for Multicultural Societies.*

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Politics and Power

- The "Middle East" has the widest range of governments than any other region of the world. There are monarchies, theocracies, democracies, sultanates, republics, and more! Many countries are undergoing changes brought about by the "Arab Spring."

- As of today ☺️ these Arab countries have agnostic (male kinship inherited) Absolute Monarchies ... or Sultanates ... or Kingdoms ... within the “Middle East:”
  
  Saudi Arabia; Oman; Qatar; and the United Arab Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Shayah, Ajman, Fujairah, Ras al Khaiman, and Umm al-Qaiwain.

- These Arab countries have Constitutional Monarchies:
  
  Morocco; Jordan; Kuwait; and Bahrain.

- These Arab countries have Elected (Presidential?) Governments (of some sort):
  
  Algeria; Egypt; Iraq; Lebanon; Libya; Palestinian Territories;
  Sudan (a Federal Republic); Syria; Tunisia; and Yemen.

- These non-Arab countries also have Elected Presidential Governments:
  
  Israel; Turkey; Kurdistan (in Iraq); and Iran (a Theocracy)

- In addition, other “non-state” organizations continue to hold great influences over people’s lives. These include:

  ○ The Muslim Brotherhood - a Sunni Muslim organization founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, a 22-year old elementary school teacher. The brotherhood calls for a conservative Islamist way of life and is currently the world’s largest and most influential Sunni Islamic group. Egypt's first elected president following the Arab Spring, Mohammad Morsi is a Muslim Brotherhood member but was recently overthrown by the Egyptian military.

  ○ Hamas - a Sunni Muslim organization created in 1987 as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas was formed to serve the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank and consists of two arms: a social wing which builds and operates schools, clinics, hospitals, and other social programs; and a military wing that has carried out numerous attacks on Israel’s military and general population.

  ○ Hezbollah - a Shi’ite organization founded in 1982 to serve the Shi’a Muslim populations in Lebanon following Israel’s second incursion into Lebanon. It also consists of two arms: a social wing and a military wing. Johnnie Hicks – 09/18/13
Recommended Books on the Middle East


**Anderson, Liam & Stansfield, Gareth (2004):** *The Future of Iraq – Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division?* Palgrave Macmillan; NY.

**Anderson, Scott (2013):** *Lawrence in Arabia - War, Deceit, Imperial Folly, and the Making of the Modern Middle East.* Doubleday; NY.


**Axworthy, Michael (2010):** *A History of Iran – Empire of the Mind.* Perseus Books; NY.

**Bahrampour, Tara (1999):** *To See and See Again.* University of California Press; Berkeley. *(Iran)*


**Beinart, Peter (2012):** *The Crisis of Zionism.* Henry Holt & Co.; NY.

**Bowden, Mark (2006):** *Guests of the Ayatollah – The First Battle in America’s War with Military Islam.* Atlantic Monthly Press; NY. *(Iran)*


**Brend, Barbara and Melville, Charles (2010):** *Epic of the Persian Kings – The Art of Ferdowsi’s ‘Shahnameh’.* The Fitzwilliam Museum; Cambridge, UK.

**Cahill, Thomas (1998):** *The Gifts of the Jews – How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels.* Doubleday; NY.

**Chandrasekaran, Rajiv (2007):** *Imperial Life in the Emerald City – Inside Iraq’s Green Zone.* Alfred A. Knopf; NY.

Cragg, Kenneth (2003): Jesus and the Muslim. One World Publications; Boston, MA.


Diamant, Anita (1992): The Red Tent. Pacador USA; NY. (Historical fiction of Biblical tribes)


Green, Joey (2005): *Jesus and Muhammad – The Parallel Sayings*. Seastone; Berkeley, CA.


Lord Kinross (1977): *The Ottoman Centuries – The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire*. William Morrow & Co.; NY.

Mango, Andrew (2004): *The Turks Today.* The Overlook Press; NY.


Packer, George (2005): *The Assassin’s Gate – America in Iraq.* Tarrar, Straus, and Giroux; NY.


Satrapi, Marjane (2004): Persepolis – The Story of a Childhood (Vol. 1) and The Story of a Return (Vol. 2). Pantheon; NY. (Graphic non-fiction) (Iran)


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Recommended Films and Documentaries

*The Axis of Evil* – A Middle Eastern comedy group

*Budrus* - Palestinians and the separation barrier

*Caramel* – Women in modern Lebanon

*Children of Heaven* – Iranian family with little means

*Color of Paradise* – Iranian blind child in rural community

*Control Room* – Inside Al-Jazeera news network

*Encounter Point* – Israeli and Palestinian families

*The Hajj, One American’s Pilgrimage to Mecca* – ABC Nightline news special

*House of Sand and Fog* – Iranian family in Los Angeles

*The Iranian Americans* – PBS Television

*Inside Iran* – ABC Nightline news special

*Jerusalem – The City Touched by God* – narrated by Liv Ullman

*Journey of Hope* – A Kurdish family’s search for a better life

*Lawrence of Arabia* – British in Arab lands during early 20th century

*Lemon Tree* – West Bank and Israel

*Monsieur Lazhar* – Algerian in Montreal

*Paradise Now* – Palestinian young men

*Persepolis* – Iranian family (graphic non-fiction)

*A Separation* – Modern Iranian family in Teheran

*The Song of Sparrows* – Iranian family

*The Syrian Bride* – Druze in Golan Heights

*Three Faiths, One God* – Judaism, Christianity, Islam

*Turtles Can Fly* – Kurdish children in Iraq

*Waltz with Bashir* – 1982 Lebanese War

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