It is with great pleasure that I present to you the inaugural issue of Nūr: the Newsletter of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies (CAIS). Nūr means “light” in Arabic, and it is my hope that you will find the newsletter enlightening. CAIS was established at St. Bonaventure University in 2015 under the aegis of the Franciscan Institute in recognition of the Franciscan Order’s enduring engagement with the Arab and Islamic world from 1219 until the current day, its contribution to the study of Christian-Muslim relations, and its promotion of Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The Mission of CAIS is as follows:

“Inspired by the historical encounter between Francis of Assisi and the Sultan al-Malik al Kamil in 1219, the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at St. Bonaventure University seeks to promote an understanding of Arab and Islamic cultures, an appreciation of both their historical and contemporary significance in the global community, and respectful relations between Muslim and Christian people.”

With an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims around the world (about 23 percent of the world’s population), Islam is the world’s second-largest religious tradition after Christianity. In the contemporary religious, political and economic global environment, it is clear that knowledge of and dialogue with the Muslim world is a necessity for global stability and peace.

Although only about 20 percent of all Muslims worldwide are ethnic Arabs, the origin and history of Islam, the language of its Scripture, prayer, and focus of its religious observances are inextricably linked to the Arab world. Thus, instruction in the Arabic language is an important component of CAIS’s activities through the Modern Languages Department. Arabic instructor, Dea Hart discusses this in her article below.

In spite of its roots in the Arab world, however, the largest population of Muslims in the world lives in Indonesia (approximately 202.9 million). It is projected, however, that within a few decades, India’s Muslim population will surpass that of Indonesia. It perhaps no coincidence that two major exhibits this year highlighted India’s rich Islamic Heritage. These exhibits are reviewed below.

Whether Indonesian, Indian, Arab, African, American or other, some two million Muslims from around the world (including members of the Allegany-Olean Muslim community) will converge on the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia during the week of Sept. 21 to perform one of the essential duties of the Muslim faith: the pilgrimage known as the Hajj. I explore this practice in an article below.

Recalling the journey of the Hajj is quite fitting as we begin the bona ventura – the “good journey” of a new academic year, and the inauguration of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies. Whatever journeys you are undertaking now – sacred and secular - may they be filled with peace and good (pace e bene)!

Fr. Michael D. Calabria, O.F.M.,
Director, Center for Arab and Islamic Studies
It is the fifth “pillar” or essential practice in Islam after the profession of faith (shahāda), prayer (salaat), fasting (sawm), and alms giving (zakah) – the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) that all Muslims are required to make at least once in their lifetime, if at all possible. This year more than two million Muslims from around the world perform the prescribed rituals of the Hajj in Mecca, Islam’s holiest city, during the week of September 26-27.

Although the rituals of the Hajj are particular to Islam, the underlying motivation and significance of this pilgrimage are universal. As religion author Karen Armstrong has commented: “If we look at the history of human spirituality, the Hajj is profoundly typical … the remarkable similarity of pilgrim theology and practice across the board suggests that we are dealing with something more fundamental.” As with other religious quests and traditions, she says, the Hajj begins with “the perception that something is wrong … Hence pilgrims seek a place where the sacred is known to have broken through to our flawed and mortal world.”

That sacred place for Muslims is al-Masjid al-Haram. This “Sacred Mosque” in Mecca encompasses the axis mundi of the Islamic world: the Ka’ba, literally “the Cube,” the stone sanctuary which Muslims believe was built by Adam as the “House of God,” and then rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It is to the Ka’ba that Muslims turn in prayer five times daily wherever in the world they are.

To make the pilgrimage to the Ka’ba then is to return to humanity’s very origin as God-centered creatures, molded by God (Allāh) from the clay of the earth, the earth to which Muslims touch their heads in prayer, remembering God’s exaltedness and our own humble state in one profound gesture. To make the Hajj is also to walk in the footsteps of the prophet Abraham, who exhorted his people to the worship of the one God and professed his devotion to that God with the words uttered today by every pilgrim to Mecca: “Here I am, O God, here I am…” To make the Hajj is also to run in the footsteps of his Abraham’s wife Hajar, reliving her desperate search for water in the desert to save their son Isma’il.

Ten miles outside of Mecca, beyond the walls of the Sacred Mosque, however, pilgrims face the reality of their struggle against sin and evil. This is the spiritual and literal high point of the Hajj: the standing at Arafat on Jebel al-Rahmah, the “Mount of Mercy.” It is here, Muslims believe, where Adam and Eve were reunited after their Satan caused them to “slip” (as the Qur’an describes it), where they repented and were forgiven by God. Here is where the modern-day children of Adam and Eve likewise repent of their sins, praying for forgiveness as if they are standing before God on the Day of Judgment. Before returning to the Sacred Mosque, as a sign of their determination to cast evil out of their lives, pilgrims cast pebbles at three pillars, just as Abraham successfully drove Satan away when tempted to defy God’s command.

While the Hajj to Mecca is a quintessential Muslim observance, there are several Christian connections. The Ka’ba, the focal point of the Hajj and Muslim prayer, apparently once contained an icon of the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ. When Muhammad ordered the removal of pagan images from the walls of the Ka’ba in 630 CE, he placed his hands over the icon so that the image would not be erased.

The simple stone structure of the Ka’ba is today draped in a luxurious black silk cover called the kiswa, meticulously embroidered with chapters (surahs) from the Qur’an in silver and gold thread. These chapters include those titled “Mary” (19) and “(The Family of) Amran” (3) which contain accounts of the Annunciation to Mary and the births of Jesus and John the Baptist, not unlike the versions in the Gospel of Luke. Although today the kiswa is now made in factories of Damietta, Egypt — the city where Francis encountered the Sultan al-Kamil in 1219 — not all textiles associated with the Hajj are as ornate as the kiswa, however. The plainest textiles seen during the Hajj are those worn by male pilgrims themselves — two seamless pieces of white cloth, one worn around the waist and the other over the shoulders. Thus, every pilgrim is stripped of signs of wealth and status and becomes indistinguishable from the millions of other pilgrims — not unlike the versions in the Gospel of Luke. Although in earlier centuries it was produced in a variety of workshops including the Coptic textile factories of Damietta, Egypt — the city where Francis encountered the Sultan al-Kamil in 1219 — Saudi Arabia, in recent centuries it was produced in a variety of workshops including the Coptic textile factories of Damietta, Egypt — the city where Francis encountered the Sultan al-Kamil in 1219.

A journey back to one’s spiritual center. A journey of repentance. A journey away from sin and towards God. A journey we make with one another. As Karen Armstrong has observed, “Perhaps in studying the Hajj, therefore, we can learn not only about Islam but also to explore untraveled regions within ourselves.”
Recommended Reading on the Hajj


A Closer Look: The Hajj: Journey of a Lifetime

What?
A National Geographic documentary on the Hajj presented by the St. Bonaventure University Center for Arab and Islamic Studies with an introduction by Fr. Michael Calabria, O.F.M., who serves as Director of the Center. Refreshments will be provided.

When?
Wednesday, Sept. 23
4:30 p.m. – 6 p.m

Where?
University Club (above the Hickey Dining Hall)

Who?
Commentary and Q&A with members of the local Muslim community including Drs. Zahid and Durriya Khairullah (SBU School of Business) and Dr. Adil al-Humadi.

Book cover images courtesy of amazon.com

Recommended Reading


Recommended Reading


Recommended Reading


As a child, included as a part of the background noise of my father’s grocery store, everyday I heard scratchy short wave broadcasts of music, news and commentary beammed from Egypt. I grew up listening to my parents speak to each other in Arabic while they spoke to me only in English. This was how it was for my parents; they wanted me to be American, so they did not teach me their native language. This was also true for all of my friends and extended family in the neighborhood. None of us learned to speak Arabic. However, the truth is I pretended I did not understand Arabic. When I grew up listening, I absorbed it rather than to hear and begin to decipher what you are hearing. Over time I did get the gist of most everything thing they said. I am sure they never knew how many secrets they revealed because of my undisclosed understanding of my father’s native tongue.

I was blessed to be part of a larger group as well. Ours was a first generation immigrant family. We were part of a tight knit immigrant community mostly from small mountain villages in Lebanon bound together by our Maronite Roman Catholic Church. Everyone in the neighborhood had about the same background and nearly everyone’s life was centered on our Church. This was true of my father as well. He was a -40-year church trustee and was honored to receive the highest award a layman can receive for service, presented by the Bishop himself. So once I reached a certain age, I found it curious that he would read the Qur’an in Arabic fairly regularly. I never questioned him about it and he is sadly no longer here to comment on my curiosity.

As an instructor in the Department of Modern Languages at St. Bonaventure, it is my opinion that Arabic, like some other things in life, gives back more than you expect. What I do know is that those students who take it seriously have communicated similar expressions to the sort of things I have written hereabout Arabic is a powerful course, a fun course and a meaningful course of study. While it is challenging, it is valuable not just as an introduction to a magnificent language, beautiful people, extraordinary cultures, and the chance to see the world differently than before. Each student, naturally, finds his or her place and everyone that takes Arabic discovers their own reward.
Arabic 101 – Elementary Arabic

Arabic 201 – Intermediate Arabic

Arabic 301 – Advanced Intermediate Arabic

Islam: Religion & Culture (THEO 203.01)

This course examines the world’s second largest religion according to its three major dimensions, namely, Islam (practices), Iman (faith), and Ihsan (integration and expression), as well as a historical dimension. Topics include the social and religious climate in pre-Islamic Arabia and the eastern Mediterranean, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the history of the Islamic community, and the beliefs, practices and spirituality of Islam. The culture of Islam, as expressed by the arts, will also be examined. Contemporary social and political issues that face the international Muslim community are also considered.

Introduction to Islamic Art & Architecture (ARTH 333.01)

This course is an introduction to the arts and architecture of the Islamic World from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the twentieth century. We examine the three principle vehicles for artistic expression in the Islamic world, namely, architecture, the arts of the book (calligraphy, illustration, illumination, and bookbinding), and the arts of the object (ceramics, metalwork, glass, woodwork, textiles, and ivory).

Highly cultured courts with a rich artistic heritage and distinctive styles and traditions. The Deccan was characterized by highly pluralistic culture, a true melting pot of peoples and cultural influences from Iran, Turkey, eastern Africa, Europe and the Far East, where artwork reflected elements drawn from Islam (particularly Shi’i and Sufi), Hinduism, and Christianity as well. This was especially exemplified in Bijapur during the reign of Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II (r. 1627-1586), a highly-cultured patron of the visual arts and music, who was as inspired by the mysticism of Sufism as he was drawn to Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of music and learning. In several paintings from Bijapur, both Muslim and Hindu ascetics seek out Sufi dervishes for spiritual wisdom. This multi-cultural milieu is also seen in a painting of the Shah: Ibrahim, accompanied by clapping accompanists, plays the tambur (a stringed instrument) as nature blooms all around him. Above the Shah’s figure, two prints of European origin have been inserted into the painting: one depicting St. Francis receiving the stigmata, the other a female saint. Racial pluralism is represented in addition to the religious with paintings depicting two Africans who rose from their status as slaves to become powerful ministers of state in their respective sultans of Bijapur. The Dutch presence in Golconda on the eastern coast is illustrated by paintings depicting a representative of the East India Company holding court or riding in procession as if he were a local ruler. A carved figurine of the Christ Child as the Good Shepherd likewise illustrates the multiculturalism of the Deccan. It is carved of African ivory which was exported from eastern Africa to Gujarat. Although the figurine depicts the Christ Child, it was probably influenced by Hindu stories of Krishna who is often shown in pastoral scenes. Moreover, the serene face of the Christ has been likened to images of the Buddha.

Islam - Sunni, Shi’i and Sufi - Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, South and Central Asians, Africans and Europeans - a world of religious, cultural, ethnic and racial diversity and confluence that resulted in masterpieces of art in every media, architecture, literature, and poetry. The art of Deccan India shows the dazzling diversity of Indo-Islamic culture and the inexhaustible creativity that resulted from it - an inspiring message for today’s world.

Recommended Reading


Learn more about the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies online

www.sbu.edu/CAIS