

Nūr نور

The Newsletter of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies

St. Bonaventure University
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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*



The Hajj Journey of a Lifetime

By Fr. Michael D. Calabria, O.F.M.



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 will perform the prescribed rituals of the Hajj in Mecca, Islam’s holiest city, during the week of September 26-21.

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 Saudi Arabia, 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.

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 Franciscan habit. And like the Franciscan habit, the white clothing of the pilgrim — called ihram — is intended to serve as the outward expression of an interior disposition of prayer and penance, chastity and non-violence — also called ihram.

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

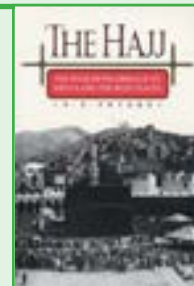
Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam. Venetia Porter, ed. London: British Museum, 2012.



Hammoudi, Abdellah. A Season in Mecca: Narrative of a Pilgrimage. New York: Hill & Wang, 2005.



Peters, F.E. The Hajj: the Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places. Princeton University Press, 1994.



Shariati, Ali. Hajj: Reflections on Its Rituals. Laleh Bakhtiar, trans. Albuquerque: Abjad, 1992.



Book cover images
courtesy of amazon.com

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.



Arabic: a Personal Journey

By: Wardia Hart

St. Bonaventure University Department of Modern Languages

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 beamed 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 us. My parents 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 you grow up listening, it hard not 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 -40year 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.

After college and grad school I was married and raised three children. When the last of them finished his graduate degree I wondered what was next. That is when I decided to take a beginning course in Arabic from Fr. Michael Calabria. A few years later, I knew learning Arabic was my passion. I could not get enough. This is when I began to annually visit Egypt for about a month to practice my conversational Arabic. I have done that now five years, and have such fond memories while learning so much!

Eventually I was offered the chance to teach Arabic as adjunct professor at St. Bonaventure University. The language remains my passion and sharing it with

my students a great joy.

I have been asked to consider what it is about Arabic that has touched me so and I realize there is no single answer. In part, it is homage to my father and his native tongue, that's for sure. But that is true only at one level. I know that my love of what I do has many facets: the elegance and sophistication of the language, the remarkable history of the Arab culture, and the astonishing beauty of Arabic works of art, all have touched and influenced me. I also sense that this is a great time to become an Arabic student, a time when knowledge of this language can lead you to places you cannot imagine. Knowing Arabic today is an asset and through it you can gain insight not just into what is going on in the world, but why. I also know there is more to it than even these things. Arabic is hard, however, the process of learning it somehow becomes its own reward. It opens doors and it allows one to see more clearly some important things that matter that were obscure before.

This brings me back to my question about why my father would read the Qur'an. Because of the conditions in Lebanon at the time of his birth, he received no formal education. His was a life where his education was informal and sprung from his experience and personal initiative. He was entirely self-taught which included learning to read in Arabic and English. Though I will never know for sure, I think that my father picked up the Qur'an knowing it is the greatest book ever written in Classical Arabic. As such he needed to approach it. When he did, he discovered beyond the incredible prose and poetry that there was beauty and meaning that touched the deepest levels of the human experience. This is speculation, and I have no idea if it is correct. I do know his closest friends included Muslims and his respect for Islam was genuine. He lamented Lebanon's chaos from which he fled, but never its people.

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 here. 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.

Exhibits Review:

By: Fr. Michael D. Calabria, O.F.M.

Visions of Mughal India: The Collection of Howard Hodgkin, The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, February 2015 ,21, to June 2015 ,21.

"Sultans of Deccan India 1700-1500: Opulence & Fantasy" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, April -20July 2015 ,20.

As mentioned above in the introduction to this newsletter, within a few decades India will be home to the largest population of Muslims in the world, greater than Indonesia or Pakistan. India's Islamic heritage is an extensive, rich and variegated one. In the same year (711 CE) that an army of the Umayyad Caliphate was crossing the Gibraltar Straits, another force arrived at the Indus River. It would be several more centuries, however, before Islamic rule was firmly established in the Subcontinent, and then its rulers were of Turkic origin from Central Asia rather than Arab. A series of Turkic-Muslim sultanates ruled in India from 1526-1206 until being toppled by the Mughals, the last of India's Muslim dynasties, and one of the three great Islamic empires of the early modern periods along with the Ottomans and Persian Safavids.

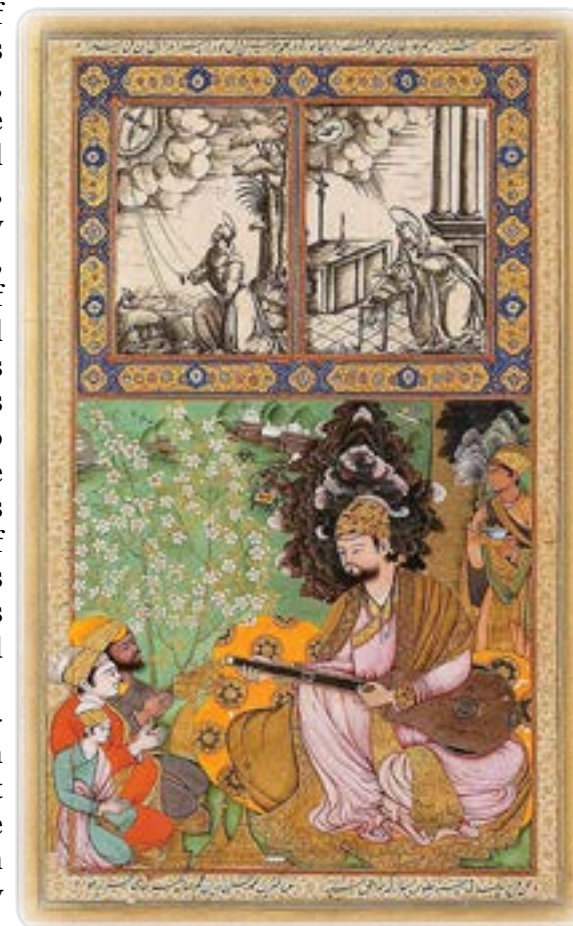
In Spring 2015, the newly-opened Aga Khan Museum in Toronto featured an exhibit of Mughal paintings from the collection of Howard Hodgkin (b. 1932), a contemporary British artist and art collector, works that are on long-term loan to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. The exhibit featured a variety of works from the reign of Shah Jahan (1658-1628) including a scene in which the Persian (Safavid) ambassador arrives in court for the *darbar*, or public appearance of the

emperor. Although the Safavids occasionally fought the Mughals for control over cities such as Qandahar, Persian influences pervaded Mughal court culture. Shah Jahan's wife for whom he built the Taj Mahal was herself the granddaughter of a Persian who had immigrated to the Mughal realm where he became one of the most powerful members in the royal court.

Most of the works in the exhibit, however, date from the later Mughal period when the British had seized control over much of the empire, and the emperor ruled over little more than the royal residence at the Red Fort in Delhi. The most poignant of portraits in the collection is that of Bahadur Shah II (r. -1837 58), the last Mughal emperor, an elderly contemplative and melancholic poet, who was deposed and exiled by the British following the Indian Rebellion (1857) and the execution of his sons and grandsons.

In Spring 2015, the Metropolitan Museum of Art launched a major exhibit titled: "Sultans of Deccan India, -1500 1700." This was quite literally a dazzling show due to the presence of several large Indian diamonds,

but also a ground-breaking exhibit because it cast light on the less-studied five Islamic Sultanates south of the Mughal Empire, in the part of India called the Deccan, comprising the five states of Ahmadnagar, Berar, Bijapur, Bidar and Golconda. These were



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. 1627-1580), 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 sultanates: Ikhlas Khan in Bijapur and Malik 'Ambar in Ahmadnagar.

The final section of the exhibit documented the presence of the Europeans in the Deccan, particularly the Portuguese who conquered in Goa on India's western coast in 1510, putting them in conflict with the

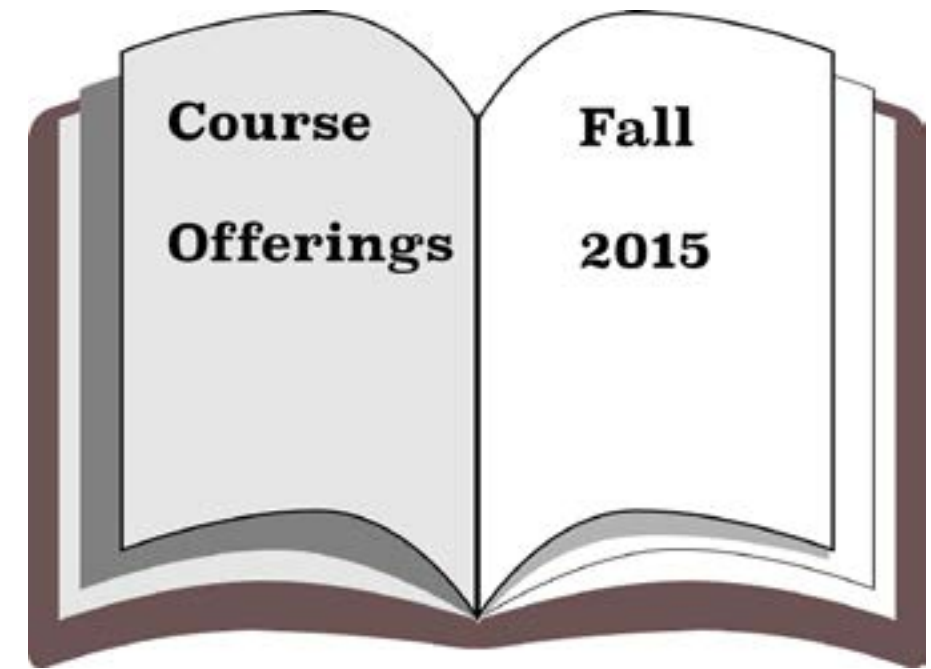
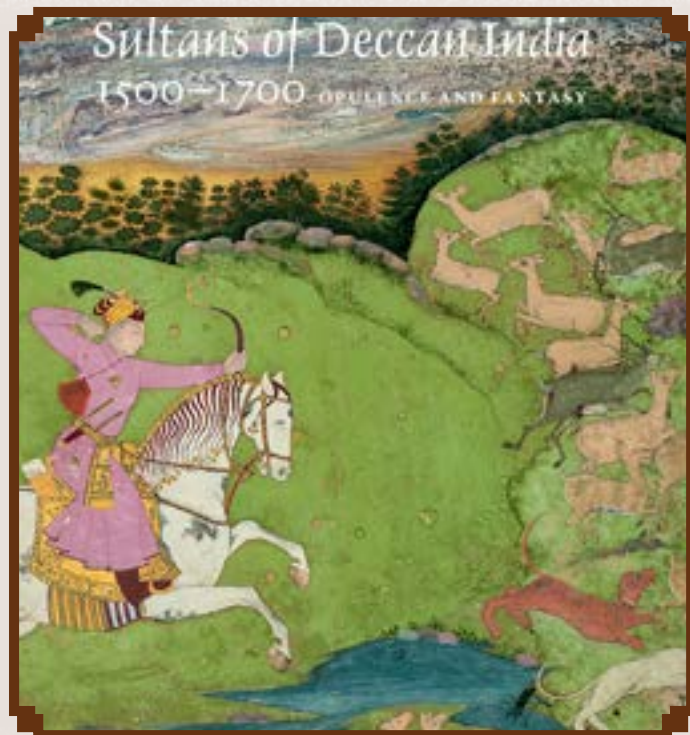
sultans of Bijapur. The Dutch presence in Goloconda on the eastern coast is illustrated by paintings depicting a representative of the East India Company holding court or riding in procession as if he were a local ruler. A carved figurine of the Christ Child as the Good Shepherd likewise illustrates 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

Haidar, Navina Najat and Marika Sardar. *Sultans of Deccan India, 1700-1500*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015.

Topsfield, Andrew. *Visions of Mughal India: the Collection of Howard Hodgkin*. Oxford: Ashmolean, 2012.



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).

Learn more about the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies online

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