



# Middlebury

**Ata Anzali**  
Associate Professor  
Department of Religion  
aanzali@middlebury.edu

June 14, 2023

Dear Alumni College Students,

I am really looking forward to our journey together through the Islamic world. This is not a course that I regularly teach at Middlebury. Both in terms of its content and the audience of the course, there is an element of serendipity and newness for me here, which I like a lot! My hope is that we all find the course material equally refreshing and interesting.

In terms of the structure of the course, I thought it would be a fun way for us to learn more about the amazing intellectual diversity of the Islamic world if each session we focused on the life, work, and legacy of a specific Muslim figure. You might be wondering why I have chosen the specific figures mentioned in my course description? I had two criteria. First, I wanted the combination of eight figures to be best representative of the *diversity* and *beauty* of Muslim traditions. Both diversity and beauty, of course, are perspective-dependent concepts—“beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” as they say. I want to acknowledge, therefore, that the content of the course is impacted by my preferences and inclination, both as a scholar who lives in America and as someone coming from a particular Muslim background. Second, I wanted to mix in figures about whom I knew less, relatively speaking, with figures that that I had studied for a long time as a challenge for myself to learn more. Like you, I consider myself a lifelong learner, and this sounded like an excellent opportunity to teach myself something!

For those who might be interested in doing a bit of reading in preparation for our class, I don't really have a single book that would help for the entire course content. I do have suggestion for you, however, if you find yourself specifically curious about some of the eight figures we are planning to discuss. If you want to know about Muhammad, the founder of Islam, and the Qur'an a bit more, I would highly recommend the first two or three chapters of Fred Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers*. If you are interested to know a bit more about Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, which will be discussed in our course when we focus on the two figures of Rabi'a and Rumi, I recommend reading chapters one, two, and six of Carl Ernst's *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*. If you want to know more about the Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi, you might want to look at her *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. If you don't have time for any of that, my one and only recommendation would be to take up *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as a reading for this summer. It is a stunning, transformative, and beautiful reading.

I look forward to seeing you in August.

Sincerely,

Ata