

Religious Studies Lectures 2014



Guest Speaker:

Omid Safi

Professor of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Omid Safi is a Professor of Islamic Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, specializing in contemporary Islamic thought and classical Islam. He is the Chair for Islamic Mysticism Group at the American Academy of Religion. Omid's *Memories of Muhammad* was published by HarperCollins and deals with the biography and legacy of the Prophet Muhammad. His most recent volume *American Islam* has just been published by Cambridge University Press, and his next two volumes will deal with modern Iran and the Persian mystic Rumi. Omid is an award-winning teacher and speaker, and he has been among the most frequently sought speakers on Islam in popular media, appearing frequently in the New York

Times, Newsweek, Washington Post, PBS, NPR, NBC, CNN, and international media. He blogs regularly at <http://omidsafi.religionnews.com>.

Thursday, Feb. 6, 2014

Lecture: 6:00 pm, Close Hipp BA Building – Room 008

Topic: "Islam in America post- 9/11"

Afternoon Workshop: 3:00 pm, Sloan 112

Topic: "Debates On Islamic Reform"

Friday, Feb. 7

Afternoon Talk: 12:30 pm, Close Hipp BA Building – Room 008

Topic: "Jalaludin Rumi: Persian Mystical Poet"

This event was co-sponsored by:
[Iranian Students Association @ USC](#)
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Religious Studies Lecture and Workshop Focus on Challenges for American Muslims

By Mardi McCabe

The speaker for the Religious Studies Lecture and Workshop for spring 2014 was Omid Safi, Professor of Islamic Studies at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, specializing in contemporary Islamic thought and classical Islam. He is Chair for the Islamic Mysticism Group at the American Academy of Religion, the primary professional organization for academics in Religious Studies. Omid's most recent volume *American Islam* has just been published by Cambridge University Press, and his next two volumes will deal with modern Iran and the Persian mystic Rumi. Omid is an award-winning teacher and speaker, and he has been among the most frequently sought speakers on Islam in popular media, appearing frequently in the New York Times, Newsweek, Washington Post, PBS, NPR, NBC, CNN, and international media. He blogs regularly at <http://omidsafi.religionnews.com>.

The Religious Studies Lecture and Workshop, held February 6 – 7, brought Dr. Safi to the USC campus to talk on these areas of particular interest in the dynamic cultural dialogues that are shaping and re-configuring our American societies.

The afternoon lecture on Thursday, February 6, addressed the topic of “Debates in Islamic Reform” focused on justice, plurality, and women. Questions of justice, he pointed out have always been central to Islam. Issues of justice must include economic justice as well as social justice and political justice. Where, he asked, are the religious leaders today who will speak truth to power? He cited the Oxfam findings that 85 individuals (who could fit comfortably in the modest size classroom in which we were sitting) own more wealth than the “bottom” 50% of humanity, more than 3.5 billion human beings.

Questions of plurality, he noted, include who gets to decide what plurality encompasses. And debates about women include both the questions of justice and of plurality. But, he said, while the men gather to decide whether women should be allowed to inter-

pret the Quran, the women are increasingly getting together in reading groups to read and discuss the Quran among themselves, and publishing their thoughts and blogging about them online.

The evening lecture on “Islam in America post- 9/11” was equally interesting and sprinkled with the same wit and humor Safi brought to the afternoon talk. The talk, punctuated with images projected onto the screens in the room, introduced the audience to the creative ways American Muslims are utilizing to negotiate the new America following the watershed events of 9/11.

Safi also brought out the multi-racial aspect of Islam in America. He noted that 20%-30% of African slaves brought to America were Muslim and today African Americans constitute a quarter of American Muslims. Safi spoke at length about Martin Luther King’s Riverside Church speech; the prophet of justice speaking truth to power.

On Friday, students and faculty gathered to hear about the mystic poet, Jalaludin Rumi, the “prophet of love.” While the basic teachings of many religions call on their followers to turn away from evil to save their soul from damnation and gain salvation, Rumi's concern is with illumination of the human spirit here and now. Rumi instead displays the wonder and beauty of God and asks, “how can you not love this beauty, how can you not be drawn to this wonder?”

