The traditional Islamic origins narrative offers a clear account of how Islam began, focused on the life of the prophet Muhammad (d. 632 CE) and his mission to bring monotheism to Arabia, and the expansion of the community he founded after his death. According to this traditional narrative, Islam was a sharply-defined religious confession from the very beginning. We know, however, that this is not how religions usually begin; rather, they pass through an initial phase during which the new faith is attempting to define itself and still has unclear boundaries, which only gradually become more sharply defined over a generation or two. Recent work suggests that a similar evolution can be traced for the early “community of Believers” (mu’minun) established by Muhammad. Drawing on various kinds of evidence, the talk will explore the degree of fluidity or “softness” in the communal boundaries of the earliest Believers’ movement, from the career of the prophet until the time, around 700 CE, when the community seems to have established firm boundaries that distinguished it sharply, as Islam, from other monotheisms.

**Professor Fred M. Donner**

Monday, April 29, 2013  
Kane 210 at 7:00 p.m.  
Free and open to the public. Reception to follow in Kane 225

**Fred M. Donner** (PhD Princeton, 1975) is Professor of Near Eastern History at the Oriental Institute and Department of Near Eastern Languages, and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, at the University of Chicago. He has published extensively on early Islamic history, including the books *The Early Islamic Conquests* (1981), *Narratives of Islamic Origins: the beginnings of Islamic historical writing* (1998), and *Muhammad and the Believers: at the origins of Islam* (2010), and dozens of articles. He has received research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He is past president of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts.

Questions about the event should be directed to neareast@uw.edu