

Syracuse University  
Department of Religion  
REL 600: Islamic Hermeneutics and Epistemology  
Dr. Ahmed Abdel Meguid  
Spring 2012

## Islamic Hermeneutics and Epistemology

### *Course Description*

This course is an in-depth study of the main epistemological systems and theories of hermeneutics that were developed in the Islamic intellectual tradition. We will explore the systems of interpretation of the Qur'ān and Sunnah (tradition of the prophet) that were developed by the three main schools of thought in Islam: *ahl al-bayān* (the legal scholars), *ahl al-'irfān* (the mystics) and *ahl al-burhān* (the philosophers and theologians). Within these three schools we will primarily focus on the *Sunni* mainstream tradition. We will study the arguments of each school as well as try to investigate the points at which it intersects with the other ones and whether or not these points of intersection could cohere in a unified theory of Islamic epistemology and hermeneutics. Starting with theology (*kalām*), we will investigate the main questions it raised like: the problem of God's attributes, the creation versus the eternity of God's speech and the problem of predestination versus freedom of will. We will focus in particular on the Mu'tazilite, the Ash'arites and then Ahl al-Ḥadīth schools examining how the first represented a radical rationalist position, the third a radical literalist position and the second tried to find an intermediate position between both. Turning to Islamic law, we will start with an overview of its four main schools: the *Ḥanafis*, *Mālikis*, *Shāfi'is* and *Ḥanbalis*. We will then take as a case study the *Shāfi'i* school, examining the work of its founder and the developments its epistemology underwent through the work of Sayf al-Dīn al-Amidī. As far as philosophy is concerned we will explore three main subjects: scientific epistemology and the relation between physics and metaphysics. In this vein, we will examine the famous debate between al-Ghazālī and Averroës, showing how they received, critiqued and transformed the Greek Heritage particularly the Aristotelian and the Neo-Platonic. Finally, in examining Sufism (the mystical tradition of Islam) we will articulate how it represents a complex hermeneutical system that combines theological, philosophical and legal stances. We will then focus on one of the central problems of Islamic mysticism, the question of the self and the constitution of subjectivity. We will read works by four key figures: Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd, al-Ghazālī, and Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī.

Our approach in the class will be both thematic and historical. Thematically, we will trace the key problems and methodologies of each school. Historically, we will try to trace the development of these themes and questions through different stages of Islamic history and across the different trends that sprouted within each of these three schools.

### *Methodology and Structure of the Seminar:*

Regular and careful reading of the material is a **must**; otherwise we cannot have informative discussions in the seminar. I will provide handouts covering the main themes and issues addressed by the readings in the previous session. I will also provide some analytical summaries and glossaries of difficult terms.

*Required Texts:*

*(All 'selections' readings are available on Blackboard)*

1. Theology:

- a. Selections from Harry Wolfson's *The Philosophy of the Kalām*.
- b. Selections from Richard Martin's *The Defenders of Reason in Islam*.
- c. Selections from Richard Mcarthy. *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School*.

2. Law:

- a. Selections from Ibn Khaldūn. *Muqaddima*
- b. Selections from Muhammad Hashim Kamali. *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*.
- c. Selections from Wael B. Hallaq. *Islamic Legal Theories*
- d. Selections from Wael B. Hallaq. *The Formation of Islamic Law*
- e. Bernard G Weiss. *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Din al-Amidi*

3. Philosophy

- a. Selections from Majid Fakhry. *History of Islamic Philosophy* and Henry Corbin's *History of Islamic Philosophy*.
- b. Selections from al-Ghazālī. *The Decisive Difference between Islam and Heresy*.
- c. Selections from al-Ghazālī. *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.
- d. Averroës. *Decisive Treatise*.
- e. Selections from Averroës's *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*.

4. Mysticism:

- a. Selections from A. J. Arberry's. *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*
- b. Al-Ghazālī. *Niche of Lights*.
- c. \_\_\_\_\_. Selections from *Revitalizations of the Religious Sciences*.
- d. \_\_\_\_\_. Selections from *Deliverance from Error*
- e. Al-Junayd. *Mystical Treatises*.
- f. Selections from Ibn al-'Arabi. *The Bezels of Wisdom*
- g. Selections from William Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*
- h. Selections from Abu al-'Ila 'Afifi's *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi*

*Course Requirements and Grading:*

**A. Class Presentation (30% of the grade)**

1. You may choose any of the readings we are discussing and prepare a presentation on it for your colleagues.
2. The number of presentations will depend on the number of students in the Seminar.

**B. Final paper (50% of the grade)**

1. 20-25 pages in length.
2. Essays must be double spaced in 12-pitch font.

**C. Class participation (20% of the grade)**

Regular attendance and constructive class participation are required. 20% of your final grade will be based on the quality and quantity of contributions in-class and on blackboard. All participants in the seminar are expected to contribute comments, questions and/or respond to other's questions/comments on the weekly reading every Sunday by 5 p.m.—Sunday after class. I will be monitoring the discussions carefully and will contribute as much as I can myself.

**D. Letter/Number Grade Conversion Table for This Course:**

|          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
|          | B+ 80-84 | C+ 65-69 | D+ 54-56 |
| A 90-100 | B 75-79  | C 60-64  | D 50-53  |
| A- 85-89 | B- 70-74 | C- 57-59 |          |

**E. A final word about Grades**

You must complete all of the course requirements by the end of the semester in order to receive a passing grade. Incompletes will be granted only in cases of actual emergency.

*Reading Schedule*

**Theology**

Session 1 (01/17): Introduction to the class and its main themes plus discussion of the Harry Wolfson's introduction to the history of Islamic theology based on Ibn Khaldūn and Al-Shahristānī

Session 2 (01/24): Mu'tazalites (Selections from Richard Martin's *The Defenders of Reason in Islam* **Plus** Selections from Wolfson's *Theology of the Kalam*—the problem of God's Attributes and the God's speech

Session 3 (01/31): Ash'arites (Selections from Wolfson's *Theology of the Kalam*)—the problem of God's Attributes and the God's speech

Session 4 (02/07): The problem of Free will (Selections from Wolfson's *Theology of the Kalam*)

Session 5 (02/14): Developments of Ash'arism: Richard M. Frank. *Al-Ghazali and the Ash'arite School* **Plus** 'Ash'ari and the Ash'arites in Islamic Religion History' I & II, George Makdisi, *Studia Islamica*, 1963.

**Law**

Session 6 (02/21): Selections from Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima* **Plus** Selections from Muhammad Hashim Kamali. *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*.

Session 7 (02/28): Selections from Wael Hallaq's. *Islamic Legal Theories & The Formation of Islamic Law*.

Session 8 (03/07): Bernard G Weiss. *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Din al-Amidi*

Sessions 9 (03/21): Bernard G Weiss. *The Search for God's Law: Islamic Jurisprudence in the Writings of Sayf al-Din al-Amidi*

### **Islamic Philosophy**

Session 10 (03/28): Selections from Majid Fakhry's. *History of Islamic Philosophy* and Henry Corbin's *History of Islamic Philosophy* **Plus** al-Ghazali. *Decisive Difference Between Islam and Heresy*

Session 11 (04/04): al-Ghazali. *Decisive Difference Between Islam and Heresy* **PLUS** selections from *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*

Session 12 (04/11): Averroës. *Decisive Treatise* **Plus** selections from *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*.

### **Islamic Mysticism**

Session 13 (04/18): Selections from A. J. Arberry's. *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* **Plus** selections from al-Ghazālī. *Niche of Lights* **Plus** selections from al-Junayd. *Mystical Treatises*

Session 14 (04/25): Selections from Ibn al-'Arabi's *Meccan Revelations* **Plus** selections from William Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* **Plus** selections from Abu al-'Ila 'Afifi's *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi*

**Final Paper due on May 15<sup>th</sup>**