HUMA 3817 3.0

Memory, Authority and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Muslim World

Winter 2015


Course Director:
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Course format: Three- hour seminar (Thursday 11:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. CB 122)
Course Description:

From the establishment of the first Islamic library and research center (Bayt al-Hikma) in Abbasid Baghdad in the early ninth century until present day, Islamic primary religious schools, colleges (madrasas), and libraries have played a pivotal role in the transmission and preservation of the knowledge of Islamic authoritative texts. These institutions trace their origin to the courtyards of mosques, which emerged as sites for memorizing, studying and copying Islamic sacred texts. Over time, they have become important social spaces in which notions of authority, tradition and knowledge have been continuously re-negotiated.

This course focuses on the modes of transmission, acquisition and reproduction of knowledge in the Muslim world from the ninth century to the present. Interdisciplinary in approach, this course brings together the works of historians, anthropologists, social scientists and Islamic scholars and philosophers who have addressed the significance of writing, memorizing, commenting and transmitting Islamic scholarly texts in the process of the negotiation of authority and tradition among different classes of ‘guardians’ of Islamic religious knowledge. The main goal of this course is threefold: First, it provides a comprehensive overview of the history of those Islamic educational institutions which played a key role in the formation of the educated Islamic religious elite (ulama’). Second, it exposes students to the institutional strategies which served to preserve and negotiate authority and knowledge in various pre-modern and modern Islamic societies. Third, it examines the complexity of the process of ‘learning’, which was itself grounded in several interrelated processes such as memorizing, listening, silent and loud repeating, writing, commenting, and so on.

A contextual examination of the rise and development of Islamic institutions of higher education, madrasas, is central to the analysis of these issues. While concentrating on examples of pre-modern and modern Sunni and Shi’i madrasas, the students focus on the similarities and differences in the modes of acquisition and transmission of knowledge of authoritative religious texts in various historical and ideological contexts. In the course of examining the history of various madrasas, the students engage in the analysis of different genres of primary and secondary source material, including biographical dictionaries of Islamic scholars, curricula from primary and secondary Islamic educational institutions, autobiographical narratives by legal scholars, mystics and philosophers, college diplomas, and so on.
Required Readings:


4. Weekly readings supplied at course’s Moodle website

Useful databases: *Encyclopedia of Islam* (York University on-line resources); *Index Islamicus* (York University online resources)

**Grade Distribution:**

1. Attendance: 10%
2. Class participation: 10%
3. Group project presentation (a chapter from George Makdisi’s *The Rise of the Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*): 5%
4. In-class presentation of a scholarly article or book-chapter: 10%
5. Weekly questions (derived from the required readings), submitted every week in class: 10%
6. Research essay proposal (summary and selected bibliography, due March 12, 2015): 10 %
7. Research essay (12 pages inclusive, due April 17, 2015): 25%
8. Final exam (last day of classes, April 2, 2015): 20%
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Course Syllabus:

I. January 8, 2015: Introduction

No readings are required for the first meeting of the class

Required viewing:

1. Al-Ghazali: The Alchemist of Happiness (DVD)

II. January 15, 2015: Memory, Authority and the Transmission of Knowledge

Required readings:


In-class discussion: Al-Ghazali: The Alchemist of Happiness (Film)
Presentations:


III. January 22, 2015: The Rise of Authoritative Texts and the Construction of Authority

Required readings:


Presentations:


IV. January 29, 2015: The Places of Learning: Madrasa


V. February 5, 2015. Madrasa, Mosque and Library

Required readings:


Presentations:


VI. February 12, 2015: Students, Teachers and Patrons of Learning

**Required readings:**


**Presentations:**


VII. February 14-20, 2015: Reading Week

VIII. February 26, 2015: Learning with the Sufis Masters

**Required readings:**


**Recommended Reading:**


**Presentations:**


IX. March 5, 2015. The Tradition of Learning in the Ottoman World

**Required readings:**


**Presentation:**

1. Benjamin Fortna. *Imperial Classroom: Islam, The State and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) (Four presenters)

**RESEARCH ESSAY PROPOSAL IS DUE TODAY!**
**IX. March 12, 2015. Women and Learning**

**Required Readings:**


2. Omaima Abou-Bakr, “Teaching the Words of the Prophet: Women Instructors of the Hadith (Fourteenth can Fifteenth Centuries)” *Hawwa* Vol 1. No 3 (2003), pp. 306-328 (York University online source)

**Presentations:**


**IX. March 19, 2015. Old Methods, Modern Times**

**Required readings:**


Presentations:


X. March 26, 2015. Book Discussion

Required reading:


XI. April 2, 2015: Final Exam