DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2013

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

PHIL 517
TTH 12:35-1:50
HUM 281

Instructor: Mohammad Azadpur
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DESCRIPTION:

This course examines Islamic mysticism through a study of the Islamic philosophical stories (ḥikāyat or qīṣas, sing. ḥikāya or qīṣa), authored by the famous philosopher Avicenna. These stories are often characterized as allegories. The English word, allegory, is from the Greek allos + agoreuein. It means literally, the inversion of public, open, and declarative speech; allegory says on one thing and means another. Avicenna’s ḥikāyat do rely on what may be called an allegorical distinction between the publicly available (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) communications of the text. Some scholars, however, dispute that allegory is a proper rendition of the form of philosophical ḥikāya. Henry Corbin, for example, argues that the literary form of the ḥikāya is a symbol rather than an allegory. Relying on the romantic distinction between allegory and symbol, Corbin writes: “The symbol is not an artificially constructed sign; it flowers in the soul spontaneously to announce something that cannot be expressed otherwise; it is the unique expression of the thing symbolized as of a reality that thus becomes transparent to the soul, but which in itself transcends all expression. Allegory is a more or less artificial figuration of generalities or abstractions that are perfectly cognizable or expressible in other ways” (Avicenna and the Visionary Recital, p. 30). In this course, we draw on state-of-the-art scholarship to bring Corbin’s distinction between allegory and symbol into focus and inquire whether and how these philosophical ḥikāyat express and stimulate a spiritual cultivation of the self, culminating in the experiences of and exchanges with the Divine. We do not confine ourselves to Avicennan stories; rather we trace their sources and interrogate the importance of their appropriation by later Muslim sages, such as Ghazali, Ibn Tufayl, Suhrawardi, Attar, Jami, Rumi and Ibn Arabi. In the process, we will also compare the insights available in this study with those in other mystical traditions, such as Platonism, Gnosticism (Christian, Zoroastrian, and Manichean versions), Hermeticism, Jewish Mysticism, and Buddhism.

TEXTS:

There are three main texts required for the course: 1) Azadpur’s Reason Unbound, 2) Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, and 3) Attar’s The Conference of the Birds. The required works should be available at the bookstore. You can also purchase them elsewhere. Other required readings are available on iLearn (http://ilearn.sfsu.edu) as PDF files. I have also ordered Schimmel’s Islam: An Introduction for those of you who need a primer on Islam.
REQUIREMENTS:
Class attendance and participation are required and count for 10% of the grade. There will be a take-home midterm and a final in-class test. These last two requirements will constitute 40%, and 50% of the final grade respectively. There will also be an optional essay assignment to improve your grade. I will discuss that in class after the midterm.

WRITING ASSISTANCE:
There are two free writing assistance centers on campus. Use the links below for more information.
1-Community Access & Retention Program (CARP): http://www.sfsu.edu/~carp
2-Learning Assistance Center (LAC): http://www.sfsu.edu/~Elac

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:
Academic accommodation is available for students with disabilities. Please see the DISABILITY PROGRAMS AND RESOURCE CENTER (HTTP://WWW.SFSU.EDU/~DPRC) in the Student Services Building 110 and talk to the instructor as soon as possible to discuss any accommodation that you may need for the course.

PLAGIARISM:
All work submitted for the course must be your own. Plagiarism will result in disciplinary action. For more details see: http://www.sfsu.edu/~collhum/plagiarism.html.

CALENDAR: This schedule of topics is subject to revision. Major changes will be discussed with the students.

1. Aug 27 & 29. Plato’s Philosophical Accounts of the Soul and Its Ascent
   -Selections from Plato’s Symposium, Phaedrus and Timaeus, on iLearn.

2. Sept 3 & 5. Islam on the Soul and Its Salvation
   -Excerpts from the Quran, in-class handout.

3. Sept 10 & 12. Islamic Philosophical Psychology and Erotics
   -Primary Texts: Avicenna’s “Treatise on Love,” Avicenna’s Introduction to the Logic of Orientals, and excerpts from Avicenna’s Psychology, on iLearn.

4. Sept 17 & 19. Avicenna on Theophanic Imagination
   -Primary Text: Excerpts from Avicenna’s Poetics.

5. Hayy ibn Yaqzan: The Symbolism of Initiation
      -Primary Texts: Avicenna’s “Hayy ibn Yaqzan,” and the Quranic story of Khidr and Moses, on iLearn.

   b. Oct. 1 & 3. Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqzan and Its Western Legacy
      -Primary Text: Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy ibn Yaqzan.

October 8: Midterm Prompt SUBMITTED to students
-Jami’s Salāmān and Absāl, on iLearn.

October 15: Midterm DUE at the start of the class.

7. Recital of the Bird and the Symbolism of the Paths to Divine Unity

a. Oct 17. Avicenna’s Recital of the Bird and Its Sources
-Primary Texts: Corbin’s “Avicenna’s ‘Recital of the Bird’,” and Avicenna’s Poem on the Soul, on iLearn.
-Secondary Texts: Excerpts from Kalilah and Dimnah, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’s The Case of the Animals vs Man Before the King of the Jinn, Chapter 12, pp. 90-97, Goodman’s “The Identity of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā & the Meaning of Their Name,” and Corbin’s “Bird as a Symbol,” on iLearn.

-Primary Texts: Ghazali’s Recital of the Bird, selections from his Deliverance from Error. Prologue of Ahmad Ghazali’s Sawāniḥ.
-Secondary Texts: Corbin’s “From Avicenna’s Recital to Attar’s Mystical Epic,” on iLearn.

Azadpur, Reason Unbound, pp. 81-94.

-Primary Texts: Attar’s The Conference of the Birds.

d. Nov 7 & 12. Wisdom of the Parrot: Death and Liberation in Rumi’s Sufism and Mahayana Buddhism

-Primary Texts: Introduction to the Philosophy of Illumination, “The Sound of Gabriel’s Wings,” “The Tale of Occidental Exile,” and Thomas’ Hymn of the Pearl, on iLearn.

November 26 & 28: No Class. Fall Recess

f. Dec 3, 5 & 10. Ibn Arabi: Journey of the Prophetic Gnostic and the Symbolism of the Bird

Dec 17, 10:45-1:15: In-class Final.