New York University

Department of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies

Spring 2017

MEIS-GA 1807/ELES-GG 2717

Tuesdays, 4:55-7:35PM

KEVO Library

Islam and Modernity:

Re-thinking Tradition, Cosmopolitanism, and Democracy

Ali Mirsepassi

Office Hours: Tuesdays: 2-4 & Wednesdays: 9:30-12.
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This graduate seminar will focus upon the broad question of how societies, predominantly influenced by Islamic traditions, might find a home in the modern world on their own terms. We will discuss the possibility of a critical re-thinking of certain modern conventional modes of thinking about modernity, secularism, and democracy. The class will examine notions of citizenship, religion, and globalization in societies that have been historically influenced by Islamic tradition and institutions. This will be done by way of interrogating the works of contemporary scholars of Islamic modernity, including Mohammed Arkoun, Abdullahi An-Na`im, Fatima Mernissi, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, and Aziz Al-Azmeh. We will explore questions that cut across the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, and law.

Required Books (available at NYU Bookstore):


**Important Note:**
The class meets for three hours once a week. I will lecture for about one hour and half. The remaining ninety minutes will be spent in student presentations and reports reflecting on readings and discussing the short essays.

**Course Requirements:**
This course is organized as a seminar requiring critical and engaged in-class discussion. In addition to reading the class materials, students will be assigned to read background texts and present reports to class. Students are evaluated and graded based on the followings:

1. Attendance and quality of class participation (20%).
2. Two short papers (five pages each) for your role as discussion leader (30%).
3. Oral Presentation (5%).
4. A term paper based on topics covered in the class (45%).

**Class Discussion Leaders:**
Each student will choose to participate in preparing for and leading the discussion of readings for two classes during the course of the semester. The student, as discussion leader, will work with the instructors to develop a critical, analytical summary of the readings to be sent by email to the class by noon of day before class. This critical summary will layout key terms, concepts, and arguments within the text. The Student will also develop a set of discussion questions or a participatory activity for class. Class discussions should focus on a close reading of the text/s, critically analyzing theoretical contributions and may then apply concepts and theories to addressing related issues/problems.

**Guidelines for Research Paper:**
You are required to write a research paper (15- pages) analyzing a particular topic of interest related to the core issues discussed in this seminar. You have wide latitude in selecting the themes/topic of your paper. However, your paper should demonstrate a critical analysis of theoretical texts or of research informed by readings and discussions from this class. You should not simply write a summary of what other theorists or scholars have done.

Students will be asked to write a short abstract describing their planned research paper. I will review your abstract and suggest changes in discussion with you. If you are uncertain about your topic, feel free to talk to me before you write your paper abstract.

**OUTLINE OF THE COURSE**
What are the roots of current crisis?

January 24th:
Orientation & Introduction:
Reading:


January 31:
Reading:


Background Readings:


Theoretical Debates on Islam and Secularism

February 7th:
A Debate on Islamic Studies
Reading:

Brue Lawrence “Spheres of Belonging and Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism.”
Ali Mirsepassi, Tadd Fernee, “Defending the Current Academic Orthodoxy in Islamic Studies.”
Islamic Studies in Germany: A Historical Overview Author(s): ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL Source: Islamic Studies, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Autumn : 2010), pp. 401-410

February 14th:
Reading:

Aziz Al-Azmeh, Islams and Modernities.
Mirsepassi, Fernee, Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism, “Al-Azmeh’s Secular Critique.”

February 21th:
Reading:

Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular.

**February 28th:**
Reading:


**Islam and Reform**

**March 7th:**
Reading:

Abdullahi An-Na’im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law.*

**March 14th:**
Spring Break

**March 21st:**
Reading:

Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy.*

**March 28th:**
Reading:

Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: to Reform or to Subvert?*
Mirsepassi, Fernee, *The Unthought in Islamic thought.*

**April 4th:**
-Ways of Being in the World: Religion and Secularism.
-Conclusion.

**April 11th:**
Reading:

April 18th:

Reflections and discussion of the class readings.

April 25th
Student Presentations

May 2nd:
Student Presentations.

Last Class