

Middle East Beyond Borders Graduate Student Workshop
Spring 2015
Tuesday, 6-7:30 PM
Kresge Room, Barker Center

February 3 - Kirsten Wesselhoeft
PhD Candidate, Committee on the Study of Religion

"Ethical Critique in a Time of Crisis: Concepts of Moral and Social Transformation in the Paris-area Islamic Sphere"

Based in 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a network of Paris-area Muslim educational and activist associations, this paper analyzes three closely interrelated moral concepts that together animate religious education, activism, and intellectual debate in French Muslim circles, particularly in the Paris area: discontent, disagreement [*ikhtilāf*], and dissent. All three are different modes of expressing critique of the status quo with a constructive moral force, both within the French Muslim community and with respect to the place of French Muslims in France as a whole, particularly in a period of national crisis that has recently become much more acute, with the attacks of January 7, 8, and 9. These concepts operate in different registers: where the "ethics of discontent" is best described as a mood, attitude, or emotion, the "ethics of disagreement" is cultivated as a set of rhetorical practices that draw on the classical tradition of *adab al-ikhtilāf*, and the "ethics of dissent" is enjoined as a pattern of political action, whether on a very small scale within a single mosque, or on a national or even transnational scale. The present paper, part of a broader project on ethical pedagogy and activism in Paris-area Muslim networks, draws these three concepts together to develop a theoretical model that 1) understands ethical development to be imbricated from the beginning with economic conditions, 2) considers "the community," in addition to the individual self, as a primary target of moral cultivation and formation, and 3) in so doing, offers a multidirectional model of ethical authority marked by skepticism, debate, and mutual critique.

Feb 17 - Kristen Stilt
Professor of Law at Harvard Law School
Co-Direct of the Islamic Legal Studies Program

"Constitutional Animals"

Attention to animal rights and welfare is growing worldwide. The typical path of legal change is through legislation, regulation, and ballot initiatives. Despite this growing attention to animals, very few countries provide protections for animals in their constitutions. In 2014, Egypt joined this small club. Its constitution requires the state to provide for "kind treatment of animals" (*al-rifq bi-l-hayawan*) in Article 45, which

otherwise deals mainly with the environment. A constitutional guarantee of animal welfare—for the animals' own sake, and not limited to animals as resources for human use—seems unlikely in the Egyptian context. In world surveys of animal welfare, Egypt places very poorly, receiving, for example, an “F” on an “A” to “G” grading scale from the organization World Animal Protection in 2014.

This paper seeks to explain how the constitutional provision was adopted, and focuses on the strategies and arguments used by the Egyptian animal advocates who were instrumental in the process. Conceptually, animal advocacy in Egypt stands at the intersection of two broad kinds of social movement framing, one relating to arguments used to advance the interests of animals in general and one relating to social movements working within a Muslim social and legal context such as Egypt. Based on primary and secondary sources, interviews, and participant observation, the paper identifies these two kinds of movements and shows how the Egyptian activists have navigated and used them in the constitutional context in particular. The paper is a narrative account of the emergence of Article 45's language and also, more broadly, an examination of how a social movement determines its frame of reference in a society where a broad range of arguments can be effective while at the same time arguments based in Islam have a particular relevance.

March 3 - Kimberly Wortmann
PhD Student, Committee for the Study of Religion

"Religious Tolerance in Islam: The Case of the Ibadhi Community of Zanzibar"
Prospectus for the PhD Dissertation

March 31 - Ari Schriber
PhD Student, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

"The Tensions of Purity: Rethinking Islamic Reformism in 1920s Shi'i Lebanon"

The question of how religious traditions undergo reform and revival requires an acute look at the processes of interpretive change and the circumstances that give rise to them. This paper seeks to explicate a specific process of this nature through the lens of a vitriolic textual debate in 1920s Shi'i Lebanon. In particular, it examines Shakyh Muhsin al-Amin's 1928 booklet *The Treatise of Purity for the Acts of Mourning*, a multifaceted treatise against the use of certain rituals for the commemoration of 'Ashura' (Imam Husayn's martyrdom). Building on previous examinations of Muhsin al-Amin's broader project, I seek to explicate the intellectual process by which he constructed his arguments. I first demonstrate how al-Amin interprets the corpus of Shi'i legal tradition to designate the rituals in question as *bid'a* (reprehensible innovation). I then consider al-Amin's simultaneous claim that the rituals are not only legally forbidden, but also confer a negative image upon the community. Putting these arguments into

conversation with al-Amin's main intellectual opponent, I argue that this self-proclaimed reform effort more precisely reflects a rearticulation of the line between sunna and *bid'a* than a desire to change or modernize the religion. Situating al-Amin alongside his more famous Sunni contemporaries, the paper thus conceptualizes the sociopolitical circumstances often affiliated with reformism as dialectical, rather than causal, in relationship to interpretive change. While other analyses of Islamic reformism have affiliated such calls for change specifically with iconoclastic scholarship of the colonial era, I suggest that what we call reform is more accurately understood as the continuous contention of normative bounds for a given matter.

April 14 - Dörthe Engelcke

Visiting Fellow, Islamic Legal Studies Program, Harvard Law School

“Reforming contested issues of Islamic family law: Morocco and Jordan compared”

This paper surveys a range of contested issues that were debated prior to the issuing of the 2004 Moroccan and the 2010 Jordanian family code, and the various legal suggestions made by state actors, secular feminists, as well as Islamists. The paper questions, why certain issues are seen as controversial. It argues that beneath the rhetoric of preserving the Islamic nature of the law lay deeper contentions over increasing state control and thus the division of public and private spheres, preferences towards the nuclear versus the extended family, gender roles, and the overall role law should play in society. A closer look at the legal suggestions made by Islamists and secular women's groups in Morocco demonstrates that both groups did differ considerably on a number of issues but that they also overlapped with respect to several amendments that were viewed by women's groups as major achievements of the 2004 Moroccan family code, such as the concept of shared assets. This is partly the case because, contrary to what Islamists frequently claim, Islamists as well as secular feminists advocate middle class interests. Furthermore, Islamists in Morocco and Jordan differed on a number of issues such as *khul'* divorce. Ideology alone is therefore ill-equipped to explain the different position-taking of secular feminists, and of Moroccan and Jordanian Islamists. Their positions can only be fully understood when considering their position within the political field.

April 28 - Yael Berda

Academy Scholar, Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies

Title TBA

The Middle East Beyond Borders: Culture, Politics, Religion

Faculty organizer: Professor Malika Zeghal, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and the Committee on the Study of Religion

Student coordinators: Bethany Kibler (Anthropology/MES), Mary Elston (Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations)

Workshop Description:

“The Middle East Beyond Borders: Culture, Politics, Religion” workshop takes for its founding premise that the “Middle East” as an object of inquiry must fundamentally engage notions of boundaries, mobility, migrations and transformations.

The “Middle East” of this workshop refers not only to MENA (Middle East North Africa) but also to individuals and communities with historic or personal ties to these regions, those living in these regions or even those engaged in their study. Critical scholarship, at its best, seeks to render the “axiomatic” transparent and subject to rigorous interrogation.

“The Middle East Beyond Borders” thus aims to foster an interdisciplinary community of scholars whose research and diverse expertise will help generate new methods, language and frameworks through which to engage the past and present of the region, ongoing developments and their global repercussions

The “Middle East Beyond Borders: Culture, Politics, Religion” workshop welcomes students from all disciplines to present their work in progress. In so doing we aim to challenge, to support and to offer a platform for collaboration – always in the spirit of creative and constructive discussion.