Philosophy in the Islamic World

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Module description

From the 7th century onward, while Europe was undergoing the medieval period, the Islamic world was an advanced civilization which spread from modern-day Spain to central Asia. Some of the great figures of the history of philosophy were Muslims – like Avicenna and Averroes – or lived in the Islamic world, like the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides. This module covers the highpoints of philosophy in the Islamic world, beginning with the reception of Greek thought into Arabic and exploring how Greek ideas were woven into the intellectual framework of revealed religion. Figures covered include al-Kindi, al-Razi, al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes; some attention is also paid to the non-Aristotelian reaction to Avicenna by al-Ghazali and others, and to the indigenous Islamic theological tradition of *kalam*. Philosophical ideas to be dealt with include proofs of God’s existence; the problem of divine attributes; the relation of philosophy to revelation; freedom; the nature of the intellect; and the eternity of the world. The module does not presuppose knowledge of Arabic or Greek philosophy, though the latter would be useful.

Readings

• The assigned primary texts are all in J. McGinnis and D.C. Reisman (ed. and trans.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: an Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: 2007). Referred to below as ‘Hackett reader.’ I suggest buying this book for the purposes of the course.

• Further reading is indicated below in the syllabus. Some articles are available on reserve in the xerox library at KCL Philosophy Dept. These are marked below with an asterisk.

• Other general works:


• There are numerous relevant entries on the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Teaching Plan

Each week’s teaching will involve a one-hour lecture and a discussion seminar on a primary text in translation.

1. Al-Kindi on God
Primary text: al-Kindi, *The Explanation of the Proximate... and The One True and Complete Agent*, in Hackett reader.


2. Al-Kindi on the eternity of the world


3. Al-Razi’s cosmology

*Primary text*: Al-Razi, *On the Five Eternals*, in Hackett reader


4. Al-Razi on ethics and prophecy

*Primary text*: Al-Razi, *The Philosopher’s Way of Life*, in Hackett reader


5. The Baghdad school


6. Al-Farabi

*Primary text*: al-Farabi, *Directing Attention to the Way to Happiness*, in Hackett reader.


7. Avicenna’s metaphysics

*Primary text*: Avicenna, selections VIII and IX in Hackett reader.


8. Avicenna’s epistemology and psychology
Primary text: Avicenna, selection VI from Hackett reader.

9. Al-Ghazali on the eternity of the world

10. Averroes on religion and philosophy
Semester One

Term One: al-Kindi, Saadia and the Mu'tazilites

1. Arabic philosophy: an overview of the tradition

2. The translation movement and al-Kindi’s circle
   *Primary text:* excerpts from Arabic translations of Neoplatonic texts.

3. The Mu'tazilites
   *Primary text:* excerpts from reports on Mu’tazilite views

4. Al-Kindi and Saadia on God
   *Primary text:* al-Kindi, *On the One, True and Complete Agent*, in Hackett reader

5. Al-Kindi and Saadia on the eternity of the world
   *Primary text:* al-Kindi, *On Divine Unity*, in Hackett reader

Term Two: Tenth Century Philosophy

6. The Baghdad school and the dispute over grammar and logic

7. Al-Farabi’s practical philosophy
*Primary text: al-Farabi, *Directing Attention to the Way to Happiness*, in Hackett reader

8. Al-Farabi’s theoretical philosophy
*Primary text: al-Farabi, *On the Intellect*, in Hackett reader

9. Al-Razi’s cosmology
*Primary text: Al-Razi, *On the Five Eternals*, in Hackett reader

10. Al-Razi on ethics and prophecy
*Primary text: Al-Razi, *The Philosopher’s Way of Life*, in Hackett reader

**Semester Two**

**Term One: Avicenna and al-Ghazali**

11. Avicenna on modality, essence and existence
*Primary text: *G.F. Hourani, “Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence,” has translations of several relevant passages.

12. Avicenna’s proof of God’s existence  
**Primary text:** Avicenna, selection VIII from Hackett reader  

13. Avicenna’s epistemology  
**Primary text:** Avicenna, selection II and X from Hackett reader  

14. Avicenna’s psychology  
**Primary text:** Avicenna, selection VI from Hackett reader  

15. Al-Ghazali’s autobiography  
**Primary text:** al-Ghazali, Deliverer from Error (several translations available)  

**Term Two: Ghazali, Averroes and Maimonides**

16. Averroes on religion and philosophy  
**Primary text:** Averroes, The Decisive Treatise, in Hackett reader  

17. Averroes against Ghazali, part one: causation  
**Primary text:** al-Ghazali, On Power, in Hackett reader  

18. Averroes against Ghazali, part two: eternity of the world.
*Primary text:* al-Ghazali, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ‘First Discussion,’ in Hackett reader

19. Maimonides on divine attributes
*Primary text:* The Guide for the Perplexed

20. Maimonides on the eternity of the world
*Primary text:* The Guide for the Perplexed