Sufism in Islam: A Survey of Mysticism, Ritual and Society

Course Description:

This interdisciplinary course will examine various aspects of religion and the religious experience in Islam through the lens of Sufism. Using methods and approaches from history, religious studies, anthropology and social studies, it will address questions such as: How did mysticism and mystics influence medieval society and ritual in the Middle East? What was Sufism’s relationship with what modern scholars have called “orthodox Islam”? Are Sufis and their particular brand of piety indigenous to the Islamic tradition? Why were Sufis so successful in spreading their traditions across the Muslim world? Is Sufism still relevant to the modern Muslim? It will begin with the development of Sufi thought in mid-ninth century Iraq through the widespread expansion of Sufi orders and a Sufi approach to religious devotion throughout the Arab world, North Africa, and especially Iran and Central Asia and finally into today’s modern religious climate. In addition to covering general aspects of the development of the Sufi tradition, we will also examine particular manifestations and interactions within specific contexts. We will spend some time looking at important figures and thinkers of the tradition; however, the focus of this course is on the social and cultural effects of Sufism across time.

Each week we will be discussing both primary and secondary works. It is important to understand the academic debates that have surrounded the study of Sufism since the nineteenth century. Primary sources, in various forms of media (books, paintings, videos, newspaper articles, archival data, lectures) are the feature event of this course. Each week, we will delve deep into the sources at hand to better understand themes of Sufism and their role on society. Each week, a student (or group of students) will present the primary sources and lead the class on this journey of understanding of the rich cultural and religious legacy of Sufism.

Educational Goals:

This course is geared towards familiarizing students both with the academic debates around Sufism and religion as well as with the major genres of primary sources historians and scholars of religion use to study it. Students should gain an introductory understanding of Sufism in its historical context, familiarity with its major thinkers, groups, and practices. Most importantly, this course is designed to help students to think critically and analytically about cultural and social categories that may be removed from their own. Students will learn to read and analyze both secondary and primary sources and present this analysis in an erudite and clear written manner. The subject matter of this course lends itself to a special study of sources describing miracles, dreams, visions, and extraordinary and supernatural events. Therefore, in addition to the important skills mentioned above, students will also learn how to critically and empathetically make a study of things that seem unreal and impossible.

Readings:
All of the Readings for this course will be available either on the course website or on Reserves at the Library.

If you would like an introductory work on Islam and Middle Eastern history, please see:

**Assignments:**

**Response Paper:** You will choose a set of two or more readings from particular week and “respond” to them in a 2-3 page essay. This assignment can be turned in anytime during the first 8 weeks of class.

**Source Analysis:** You will be reading, listening and viewing a variety of primary sources each week. From these sources, you are to select at least one source for further analysis and write a short (2-3 pages) paper. Your papers should discuss the opportunities and limitations presented by the source style and/or genre, the pitfalls and advantages of its use for historical study, the biases of the author(s), and insightfully reflect on how the piece speaks to broader themes of this course. You will present one of these papers to the class and lead us in a discussion. We will be selecting these in class and you will turn in your paper and do your presentation on the day your assigned text is scheduled.

**Book Review:** You will write a short book review (3-4 pages) analyzing and critiquing the author’s arguments and presentation, and how the book fits into the greater academic study of Sufism and Islam. You can either select a book from the syllabus or one of your own choosing. If the book is not on the syllabus, please let me know what you are choosing in advance. Your book review is due in class in Week 6.

**Final Project:** You will write a longer paper (10-12 pages) or do a project that appeals to you (short film, website, artistic production etc.) on a topic of your choice stemming from a question, theme or topic introduced in this course. This project/paper needs to critically examine and evaluate the existing scholarship on your topic while presenting your own ideas and perspectives. Early in the semester you will meet with me to discuss your project/paper idea and then present a short proposal and bibliography to the class, which will also be turned in to me. The final paper will be due during Exam Week.
Grading:

Participation- 25% [includes presentation of Source Analysis- 5%]
Response Paper- 10%
Source Analysis- 15%
Book Review- 15%
Final Project- 35% [proposal & bibliography- 5% final project- 30%]

*Late Assignments will be marked down one grade for each day past the deadline (e.g. from an A to A-).

Schedule:

Section 1- The Origins of Sufism

Week 1: Introduction
We will go over the syllabus and course requirements. I will begin with a short introduction to Islam and Sufism, some of the basic terminology necessary for this course, the geography of the areas we will study, and issues of periodization. We will also problematize ideas such as “Religion,” Mysticism,” “Spirituality.”

- Primary sources: We will read in class and discuss selections from “Sources of Islamic Mysticism: The Quran,” and “Early Sufi Qur’an Interpretation: The Quranic Commentary Attributed to Ja’far as-Sadiq,” in M. Sells (ed.), Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj and Theological Writings, Paulist Press, 1996, pp. 29-46 & pp. 75-89. (hereafter listed as Sells, Early Islamic Mysticism)

Week 2: Development of Sufism in the Medieval Period
We will look at the various ways historians and scholars of religion have studied early Sufism (e.g. the search for its origins in other traditions, phenomenological approaches, etc.) and discuss the problems and merits of such studies. We will look also look at new formulations of Sufi beginnings, key individuals, early development in Iraq, competing movements in Khurasan and the relations this nascent Sufism had with other emerging intellectual and religious trends in the medieval period.

Week 3: Tariqa Sufism into the Early Modern Period

The most lasting legacy of medieval Sufism is the development and spread of orders of Sufi brothers bound to a particular leader and forms of worship. We will examine how this model was constructed by historians and how particular orders developed and interacted within their respective societies. We will compare orders and their respective ritual practices across geographic boundaries to assess the possibility of an “internationally” cohesive Sufism as a link for an umma without a (universally accepted Sunni) caliph in the post-Mongol period.


Week 4: Sufism and Modernity

We will focus on how the huge forces of modernity, including Western Imperialism, Enlightenment thinking new forms of communication and technology changed the place of Sufism in the Muslim religious world. From internal calls to reform outdated traditions to the outright rejection of Sufism by many modernists, this period was and remains extremely dynamic and informative of the changing needs of ordinary Muslims.

- **Primary Source:** Muhammad Yaqoubi, “Refuting ISIS,” VIDEO (http://livestream.com/zaytunalive/refutingisis/videos/99987517)

Section 2- Sufism in Practice

Week 5: Sainthood: Hagiography and Memory
We will discuss memory, its place in the construction of Sainthood and its importance in creating the tradition and community. We will look at the various genres of hagiographical writing and how they utilized and presented memory.


Week 6: Pilgrimage
Pilgrimage was one of the most public and widespread manifestations of religion and piety in the Medieval period and continues to inspire Muslims across the world, from Indonesia to India, from the Taklamakan Desert to the United States of America. We will look at the changing performative qualities of this act, its social manifestations, and literary heritage. We will also seek to understand the positions of those who reject this practice, both in the past and in the present.

- Clip from Hindi film *Maqbool*, illustrating shrine visitation in modern India (will be shown in class)
Week 7: Visions and Dreams
Medieval Sufi literature is replete with stories of dreams and visions leading Sufis and common Muslims to great places, physically and spiritually. We will explore the various uses of this central aspect of the Sufi experience and see if it still has relevance in our modern world.

- John Renard, Friends of God, Chapter 3, pp. 67-89.

Week 8: Popular Preaching, Dhikr and Performance
We have looked at the writings of many Sufis from the urban intelligentsia; we now turn to how the traditions and knowledge of Sufism was and is now translated to a larger audience.


**Last Day to Turn in Response Paper**
Section 3- Sufism and Society

Week 9: Conversion & Islamization
Different time periods and geographic locations lent themselves to various forms of conversion processes. We will consider the role of different kinds of Sufis and their institutions in conversion attempts-- from the early frontier ascetic-warriors to later wandering dervishes- and how converted communities understood their new status.


**Paper Proposal & Bibliography Due In Class**

Week 10: The Many Hats of a Sufi Shaykh
Sufis played a larger role in society than merely providing religious and spiritual help. This week, we will explore the many different social roles of Sufis in their societies—as landowners, employers, intercessors, advisers to rulers, part-time shaykhs etc.

- John Renard, Friends of God, Chapter 6, pp. 143-163.

**Last Day to Turn in the Response Paper**
**Week 11: Sacred Spaces- Shrine, Mosque, Lodge**

We will examine the various kinds of religious architecture associated with Islam and the influence of Sufism on architecture (and vice versa). An important part of this discussion will be how the actual space makes possible certain forms of religious experience and feeling. For a better understanding of modern worship spaces in the US, we will visit the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury.

- **Primary Sources:** Visit to ISBCC; Lisa Ross, “To Mark a Prayer,” VIDEO (http://www.studiolisaross.com/projects/video-prayer.php)

**Week 12: Women and Sufism**

We will look at the various roles women have played and continue to play as Sufis, poets, patrons, scholars, feminists and worshippers throughout the medieval and modern periods. We will also examine the problematic ways that they have been portrayed or not portrayed.

Week 13: Poetry & Painting
Ecstatic poetry and brilliant paintings have long been vehicles of Sufi expression from the early period to the present. We will look at some seminal Sufi poets and the themes they presented in their poetry. In addition to viewing digital reproductions of important paintings, including the Timurid Mi’rajnama, students will be encouraged to visit the Boston MFA to see some original works. We will also examine the new forms of art that modern Muslims are using to express themselves.

- **Primary Sources**: Selection of Poems: “Mir ‘Ali-Shir Nawa’i: A Poet’s Intentions;” and “Jalal ad-Din Rumi: Ghazal,” in J. Renard (ed.), *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life*, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 170-172, 208-209.; We will also be studying images of important paintings related to the Mi’raj, and poetry of Nizami, Sa’di and Jami.; Sabri Brothers, “Bhar do jholi,” Qawwali Performance (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkFF7ubTT6Q)