Medieval Islam: Introduction Essay

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The period between the fifth and fifteenth centuries represents the beginning of Islam, its swift expansion in a series of thriving empires, and the height of Islamic intellectual and cultural development. Including readings from this flourishing intellectual and artistic period would be an exciting addition to any ACS classroom. Students benefit from a different cultural perspective on the "middle ages" and exploring questions of "Who am I?" from the non-Christian world. Moreover, because of the medieval translation movement and the reverence for Judeo-Christian scriptures in Islam, medieval Islamic culture links directly to many readings from ancient Greece, the Hebrew Bible, and Gospels. The following essay provides ACS faculty with the basic knowledge of Islam, the Qurʾān, and medieval intellectual culture to facilitate including a medieval Islamic text in the ACS classroom. Following this overview, I offer pedagogical advice for exploring a medieval Islamic text in ACS 1000.

The Formative Period, The Qurʾān, and Islamic Empires

The religion emerges in seventh-century Arabia, where a merchant named Muhammad (570-632 CE, d. 11 AH) began preaching a message that Muslims believe was revealed to him by the Angel Gabriel. Muhammad was born in Mecca and grew up as an orphan under the care of his uncle. According to his biography, he is a descendent of Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham. At 25, he married a prosperous older businesswoman named Khadijah and worked managing her trading company. Known for his introspection, he frequently went to a mountain outside Mecca to contemplate. Here, at the age of 40, he said that the Angel Gabriel came to him and revealed the first verses of the Qurʾān. For the remainder of his life, he received these messages sporadically. Khadijah was the first person to accept his message, followed by his cousin ʿAlī and other members of his family. He gained a small following in Mecca, but also attracted the negative attention of the authorities, as his message included targeting corruption in Meccan society. Moreover, the strict monotheism of Islam was a major shift from the polytheism of pre-Islamic Arabia. Following threats on his life, Muhammad and his community fled to Medina, in what is known as the *hijra* (flight). This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. After gaining more followers in Medina and winning several battles against the Meccan community, Muhammad and his community returned triumphant to Mecca. Muhammad died shortly after returning to Mecca. Our knowledge of Muhammad's life comes from short reports about him by his companions (*ḥadīth*) and longer narrative biographies (*sīra*).

Codified soon after Muhammad's death, the Qurʾān is the major scripture of Islam and it guides the bulk of medieval intellectual and spiritual culture. Traditionally, Muslims believe that the Qurʾān is the direct speech of God, revealed to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. Though Muslims revere the Bible, the Qurʾān differs from the Bible significantly in form and content. It divided into 114 chapters of varying lengths ranging from a few lines to hundreds of pages. It is arranged by length of chapters, roughly from longest to shortest and much of the Qurʾān is not in

narrative form. As mentioned above, the stories of Muhammad's life are not found in the Qurʾān; rather, many chapters of the Qurʾān are hymnic, exploring major themes of such as the unity and power of God, the importance of justice, and human's role in the natural world. It is most traditional to hear the Qurʾān recited in prayer or another devotional setting, and the Qurʾān's Arabic is especially eloquent and beautiful. In the medieval context, many intellectuals would memorize the Qurʾān and weave quotes from it into their writings, akin to medieval theologians' biblical references. According to Muslim belief, the Hebrew Bible and Christian Bibles are sacred scriptures, but the Qurʾān is meant as the last and final revelation to complete the messages contained in the previous two works. Muslims revere many Jewish and Christian prophets, with Adam, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus being particularly important.

The Qurʾān, together with Muhammad's example, form the basis of Islamic ritual life. The five basic practices of Islam are 1) a testimony of faith, 2) five daily prayers, 3) an annual donation to charity, 4) an annual month-long fast, and 5) a pilgrimage to Mecca once during one's lifetime (if one is physically and financially able). Marriage and family life are emphasized in Islam, in part because Muhammad married and had a family. In a famous *ḥadīth* report, Muhammad declared that "there is no monasticism in Islam," and in another, he said that marriage is "half the religion." As a result, it was quite uncommon in the medieval period for people to remain celibate, even if they were engaged in practices of piety akin to Christian monks and nuns. Muhammad's family life also influenced the allowance of polygamy; his marriage to Khadijah was monogamous, but following her death, he married multiple women. Islamic law allowed men to marry up to four women, a major shift from pre-Islamic Arabia, where a man would marry an unlimited number of women. Muhammad also included the caveat that a man could only have multiple wives if he was able treat all of them equally. Some scholars took this to imply that monogamy was preferable, but that polygamy was acceptable.

In addition to his example for ritual and family life, Muhammad was in a position of political power when he died, giving rise to a controversy over leadership following his dead. This crisis in leadership led to the two major sects of Islam. Some argued that Muhammad had designated his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAlī, as the next leader of the Muslim community (*caliph*). However, many followers believed he had not designated a leader and voted on the next leader of the community. This group, now known as Sunni Muslims, elected Muhammad's best friend and father-in-law, Abū Bakr, to lead the community. Sunni Muslims then elected ʿUmar, ʿUthman, and ʿAlī as caliphs after Abū Bakr, calling these three the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs." Those who believed Muhammad had designated ʿAlī as his successor did not recognize Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, or ʿUthman, and immediately followed ʿAlī. This group became known as Shiʾa Muslims. The early period was quite violent, as ʿUthman was assassinated, and the two groups fought bitterly. The dispute codified into sects following the massacre at Karbala, where Sunni troops killed Husayn (Muhammad's grandson) and his followers. Sunni and Shiʾa practices are relatively similar, but their jurisprudence and theology differ significantly. Due to the tragic history of early Shiʾa

leaders, the concept of martyrdom is emphasized in Shiʾa Islam. Today, 85-90% of the world's Muslims are Sunni and 10-15% are Shiʾa.

Following these early leadership struggles, the medieval period saw several major empires and a massive expansion of the Islam. The first empire following the early caliphs was the ʿUmayyads, who ruled from ca. 660 to 750 CE. Under the ʿUmayyads, the empire expanded through a series of conquests. At the end of the ʿUmayyad Caliphate, the Islamic Empire stretched from Central Asia to Spain, and covered much of North Africa. After the end of the ʿUmayyad Empire, much of this territory remained in Muslim control, but under smaller, more regional rule. The ʿAbbasid Caliphate was the next major empire, ruling from 750-1258 CE from the new capital of Baghdad. Though the ʿAbbasids lost control of North Africa and Islamic Spain, their empire was a very successful one overall. As major patrons of intellectual culture, theology, philosophy, and law peaked during the ʿAbbasid period. The Fatimid Caliphate was a group of Shiʾa rulers that controlled North Africa from 909-1171. In the Islamic West (Spain and Morocco), the Almohad regime ruled from 1121-1269, followed by the Almoravids. The final major empire was the Turkish Ottoman Empire which began in the late medieval period and would maintain control of much of the region until its end in the early 20th century.

While the Islamic Empire expanded quickly, and many people in the conquered lands converted, religious and cultural diversity was a feature of each empire. Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities could practice their religions and were considered full citizens if they paid a modest tax. Though there was certainly discrimination, Muslim rulers were generally quite tolerant of religious minorities, and forced conversion was not permitted under Islamic law. As Islam spread throughout Central Asia and North Africa, West Africa, China, and Southeast Asia, there was extensive cultural and ethnic diversity. Arabic became the lingua franca of the educated classes, but various indigenous languages remained in use throughout the empire. In the medieval period (as well as today), the majority of the world's Muslims were not native Arabic speakers.

Islamic Intellectual and Religious Culture: Theology, Philosophy, Law, and Mysticism

As mentioned above, the medieval period was one of high intellectual production. The early medieval period's theologians and legal scholars focused on defining a nascent religious tradition. In the middle and late medieval period, there is a thriving intellectual culture of debate and exchange. There was a relatively standard curriculum in Islamic schools, featuring Arabic grammar, Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, Islamic law, theology, and philosophy. Many philosophers and theologians had court positions or teaching posts, but it was also common for them to work as physicians and judges. Regarding women's education, upper class Muslim women would frequently have some formal education. Lower class men and women alike would likely receive no formal education and be taught trades and domestic tasks. Though formal theology, law, philosophy, and medicine were exclusively pursued by upper-class Muslims, mysticism provided a spiritual avenue available across the class and gender spectrum. The following section provides an overview of these movements and their relationship to one another.

One of the earliest and most influential theological movements was a group of rationalist theologians called the Muʾtazilites. This school received patronage from ʿAbbasid caliphs from approximately 850-1050 CE and held the dominant interpretation of Islamic theology throughout this period. Muʾtazilites believed that divine laws must accord with reason. The Muʾtazilites had five major principles of theology: divine unity, divine justice, the fulfillment of all divine promises, the commitment to take an intermediate position on an issue if available, and "commanding the good and forbidding evil." Muʾtazilites also rejected the concept of divine predestination and put evil solely in the sphere of humans. Though quite successful in their day, eventually, the Muʾtazilites fell out of favor. Emerging at first as a response to Muʾtazilism, Ashʾarite theology eventually became the most prominent theological position in Sunni Islam. It was a major force in later empires and remains influential today. Arguing for a fully transcendent and voluntaristic God, the Ashʾarites rejected must of Muʾtazilite reasoning, considering it to misunderstand God's limitless power. Distinguishing themselves from the Muʾtazilites further, Ashʾarite theologians did not believe that divine law had to adhere to human reason, nor did humans have complete free will. According to the Ashʾarites, God allows humans to act such that humans remain responsible for their actions, but their choices are ultimately provided for and limited by God.

Distinct from the major approaches of Sunni theology, Shiʾa Muslims revered a series of leaders of the community who were in the direct lineage of Muhammad, called Imams. There are several different branches of Shiʾa Islam, but the largest is called "Twelver Shiʾism" as they believe in a lineage of twelve Imams. These twelve, along with Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fāṭima are called "Fourteen Infallible Ones." According to Shiʾa belief, Imams are: immune to error or sin, their pronouncements carry unrestricted authority, and the faithful can rely on them fully. Shiʾa Imams are considered to have a closer relationship with God that falls just short of prophetic status.

In addition to these major theological "schools," a strain of mysticism called Sufism developed in ninth-century Baghdad. Sufis attempt to focus their entire life towards God. This devotion is typically done in a master-disciple relationship, where a disciple works closely with a master to work on an intense series of spiritual purification. While there is no official monastic tradition in Islam, there were various Sufi orders based on shared theologies, practices, and devotion to particular spiritual masters. Some Sufis live away from their families in lodges, and a significant number of Sufi men and women chose not to marry in order to focus on their devotion. In addition to practice, Sufis also developed highly sophisticated theology and philosophy. Sufi philosophers were typically called *hakīms* ("sages," or "wise men") and espoused complex metaphysics and epistemologies that attempted to understand the possibility of direct experience with God. There were Sufi philosophers whose primary source materials were the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, along with the experiential insights gained through mystical practice.

Closely related to Islamic theology, Muslim legal theorists thrived during the medieval period. The Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* are the primary source materials for Islamic law, and when questions cannot be answered directly by these sources, jurists turned to analogical reasoning. Islamic law governed both religious obligation and practice as well as civil legal proceedings in the medieval period. The scope of civil issues included inheritance and property law, family law, criminal proceedings. Akin to Judaism, Islamic law also covers religious ritual, with major legal schools offering distinct views on questions such as how to prepare for prayer and when to perform ritual ablutions. There are four major legal schools (*madhabs*) in Sunni Islam: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʾi, and Hanbali. There are three major Shiʾa legal schools: Zaidi, Jafari, and Ismaili.

Theology and law drew primarily from Arabic-language source material, whereas Islamic philosophy emerged and flourished following a major translation movement that made Greek texts available to the intellectual class. *Falsafa*, or Peripatetic philosophy was a Neo-Aristotelian rationalist approach. Due to a misattribution of Plotinus's *Enneads* to Aristotle, there are some Platonic and Neoplatonic elements throughout Peripatetic thought. Following the translation into Arabic, Muslim philosophers developed a rich philosophical vocabulary, wrote extensive commentaries on Aristotle and Plato, and original works of metaphysics, physics, mathematics, epistemology, and logic. Through the rich commentary tradition and the late-medieval Arabic-into-Latin translation movement, Islamic philosophy had a major influence on the preservation of Greek thought and its "rediscovery" in Europe.

Though a major force in Islamic intellectual life, the Peripatetics were controversial, as the Qurʾān and other Islamic sources played a much less significant role in their intellectual work than those of the theologians or legal scholars. In the eleventh century, the famed theologian Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111 CE) wrote a critique of philosophical reasoning called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. One of the most prominent Peripatetics, Muhammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 594/1198) wrote a rebuttal called *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. The debate between Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd is sometime classified as the *end* of Islamic philosophy, but this characterization is inaccurate. Following the critiques of Ghazālī, Islamic philosophy remained active, albeit in a less prominent place in intellectual life. In addition to Peripatetic rationalism, there was significant exploration of mystical or experiential philosophy throughout the medieval period.

Art and Literature

From the dazzling architecture of Islamic Spain (Al-Andalus) to the poetry of Rumi, medieval Islamic culture was rich with art, literature, and music. Poetry was a revered art form in pre-Islamic Arabia, and the tradition continued after the rise of Islam. There was a tradition of spontaneous "poetry battles," where people would settle a dispute with seeing who could have the cleverer poem. As the tradition developed in Persia and the Islamic East, one saw a rise in epic poems, some of the most famed being Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi's *Masnavi* (called "The Qurʾān in Persian"), Farīḍ al-Dīn Aṭṭār's (d. 618/1221) *Conference of the Birds*, and Hafez's *Diwan*. These epic poems show

the richness of medieval Islamic devotion and artistic production, as they are deeply spiritual and reference the Qurʾān extensively.

Islamic art was a highly technical and inventive form that developed out of a theological convention against depicting Muhammad directly. The most iconic images from the medieval period are the complex geometric designs and calligraphy that decorate mosques and other buildings. However, while there is a convention against showing Muhammad's face, this does not mean that there are no images of humans in Islamic art. There was a rich tradition of illuminated manuscripts and miniature art in Persia and India. Finally, though a controversial topic, music thrived in Sufi communities. *Qawwali*, or sacred music was a key part of Sufi devotion in India and the famed "Whirling Dervishes," of the Mevlevi Order of Rumi demonstrate the spiritual linking of music and dance.

On Incorporating Medieval Islamic Texts to ACS 1000

Medieval Islamic texts present a rich example of the shared intellectual lineage between the Muslim world and "the Western canon." Beyond this connection, Islamic sources offer an avenue for students to explore the universality of the *questions* posed by Augustine and others but recognize that one need not always come to the same answers. It is quite beneficial for Catholic and non-Catholic students alike to explore the ways in which another major world religion approached these questions in order to broaden and deepen their own understandings of the Augustinian Catholic mission. Furthermore, as the university seeks to diversify its student population, it seems that ACS, the core of the first-year experience, ought to make a concerted effort to diversify its syllabi to reflect the myriad ways in which humans have understood our guiding question of "Who am I?"

For professors hoping to teach the Qurʾān, it is first and foremost important to note that the Qurʾān is rather distinct from the Bible in form and content. Rather than a narrative about Muhammad and the community, the bulk of the chapters of the Qurʾān are shorter, more hymnic in nature, and highly symbolic. As mentioned above, it is primarily received aurally, and so playing audio of Qurʾānic recitation would be particularly important for helping students to understand the role of the Qurʾān in Muslim devotional life. It is also essential to note that many chapters contain multiple topics, so if one wishes to devote attention to a specific topic, one may have to search across multiple chapters. Finally, professors hoping to compare the life of Muhammad to other prophets should consult the *ḥadīth* and Ibn Ishāq entries of the Medieval Bibliography. For advice on teaching Peripatetic philosophy, mysticism, or Islamic literature, please consult the individual entries on the Medieval Bibliography. For instructors who would like to use an Islamic text, but are not yet committed to a full book, consider excerpting a section of one of the texts for a lively class session in conversation with a medieval Christian text.

A key for instructors hoping to incorporate materials into ACS will be to help students to feel comfortable with a new tradition. Giving a bit of background on Islam before reading an Islamic text can help students feel more prepared to read but doing so may result in students looking for

the text to uphold Islamic orthodoxy and missing ways in which certain texts do *not* conform to orthodox ideas. For this reason, while it is very helpful to inform students in advance of the *form* of the text they will read, I suggest giving necessary historical or theological context as the discussion emerges. This will require a bit more preparation on the instructor's part but will reward the discussion tremendously.

Before beginning to read a medieval Islamic text, it is helpful to highlight some formal conventions that could be intimidating for students. Many Islamic texts begin with honorifics for Muhammad and other teachers and frequent references to major theologians or spiritual leaders. These references can generally be skimmed over or even skipped unless you wish to emphasize the form of the writing. Islamic Studies scholars also include quite a bit of transliterated Arabic in their translations. This can be distracting or confusing for students, so emphasizing that they need not memorize the Arabic phrasing can make the texts much more accessible as well. It can also be intimidating to pronounce Arabic and Persian names, particularly if a text uses full diacritics. I urge ACS professors to teach students to pronounce Arabic names, do so with new Greek or Roman names. However, there are several letters in Arabic that do not exist in English, so they are noted with diacritics. To help ACS professors understand what diacritics mean for pronunciation, I have included a transliteration and pronunciation guide below.

Instructors also may wish to include images or videos of Islamic art and architecture to give students a clearer image of the Islamic world as they read other texts. One could certainly explore the concept of art and devotion by pairing medieval art and calligraphy alongside Western paintings. Watching videos of the dance of the Mevlevi Sufis can be used alongside Rumi quite effectively to highlight the lived practices that emerge from his poetic ideas.

Medieval Islamic texts offer a wonderful opportunity for ACS professors to grow and learn in community with their students. As you plan to incorporate new texts, do background research for context, but keep in mind that your training will bring a fresh set of questions to these texts and (hopefully) your curiosity will spark something similar in your students. There is tremendous value for both instructors and students to explore this oft-overlooked area of the medieval heritage and expand our notion of "canon."

Recommended Secondary Sources and Resources

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    (http://historyofphilosophy.net/)

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A note on dates and pronunciation

There is a distinct Islamic calendar, so one will often encounter two sets to mark the Islamic and Gregorian calendars ("AH" refers to *anno hijri* and follows Islamic dates, whereas "CE" or "AD" will follow the Gregorian).

The Arabic language has several letters that do not exist in English. When seeing Arabic names or phrases, scholars will often use diacritic marks to do this. Below is a rough pronunciation guide.

Vowels:

A	short a ("man")
Ā	Long "a" sound ("baa")
U	Short "u"/"o" ("fun")
Ū	Long "u"/"o" ("school")
I	short "i"/"e" ("pin")
Ī	long "i"/"e" ("preen")

Consonants with English equivalents

B	H	L	R	T	Y
D	J	M	S	Th (throw)	Z
F	K	N	Sh (show)	W	

Note: there is no equivalent of "P" or "V" in Arabic.

Consonants with no English equivalent:

Ḍ	Heavy "d" – imagine there is a weight on your tongue when you say this letter and the next vowel
Ḥ	Aspirated "h" sound (think of the sound you make when cleaning your glasses)
Gh	Ghayn – kind of a "ghrr" sound from the back of your throat that affects the next vowel
Kh	"Chutzpah"
Q	Aspirated "q" or "k" sound (think of clucking)

Ṣ	Heavy "s" – imagine there is a weight on your tongue when you say this letter and the next vowel
Ṭ	heavy "t" – imagine there is a weight on your tongue when you say this letter and the next vowel
Ẓ	heavy "th" sound – imagine there is a weight on your tongue when you say this letter and the next vowel
ʿ	You will always see this preceding a vowel (ʿa, ʿu, ʿi). The vowel with be pronounced from the back of your throat, inhaling, with a note of surprise.
ʾ	Glottal stop ("uh oh")

And a note on the "al"

There are certain Arabic letters in which you pronounce the "al" as written, whereas others double the sound of the letter itself. (i.e., "Farid al-Din" is pronounced and sometimes transliterated as "Farid ad-Din")

Here is a list to help with this:

For the following letters, pronounce the al (i.e, al-Ghazālī)

All vowels, b, j, ḥ, kh, gh, f, q, k, m, w, y, h

For the following letters, double the consonant (i.e., as-Sulamī)

T, th, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, ẓ, l, n