

## CONCEPTIONS OF ISLAM — A PH.D. COURSE

One of the most important as well as problematic issues in today's societies is how to relate to, and conceive of, Islam. Rejecting an essentialist conception of Islam as a "given", the need is still there to define parameters for a reasonable understanding of what "Islam" may mean, in particular in a world of changing social relations and increasing globalization of discourses, interacting with local conditions and conceptions, both "there" in the Muslim world and "here" in the West.

This Ph.D. course will take up various facets of how Islam is understood to try to delineate ways of conceiving Muslim experiences as well as modern understandings of what it means to "Muslim".

The course will take up two main themes, *Islam and Feminism*, and *Interpretations of Islam today*. The two are interlinked, and several of the speakers will be able to discuss both themes, but still will each have a special focus of its own.

### **Islam and feminism**

Across Europe and beyond there are ongoing debates about the relationship between feminism and Islam. Many secular-feminist intellectuals have adopted a liberal feminist discourse where Islam is seen as a threat to women's individual human rights and feminist goals of putting gender-based discrimination to an end. Others have focused on the emergence of an "Islamic feminism", and its effectiveness in furthering gender justice within the framework of the Islamic tradition. And yet others again have challenged the universalist ambitions of feminism, and problematized feminist assumptions about freedom, agency, authority and the human subject. This debate raises fundamental questions about how we understand "feminism" as well as about how we understand "Islam". The theme will investigate such debates on two levels: ethnographic accounts of how the relationship between feminism and Islam is played out in various contemporary settings and discussions of how the relationship articulates at the level of theory and epistemology. On the ethnographic level speakers will thematize the kinds of subject positions that are available to Muslim women and men in the West, and how these positionings relate to different "feminisms" and the question of gender justice. We also want to focus on the subject positions adopted by feminists in relation to Islam, and to what extent these positions are shaped by the current construction (by media and governments) of Islam as the "Other" of "the West" and the racist imaginaries about Islam and Muslim women and men in popular culture. On the theoretical and epistemological level speakers will engage the question of whether and to what extent existing tools in gender studies and feminist theory allow us to grasp the complexities of Islamic gendered practices. In which ways do Islamic gender politics, as they are variously shaped across time and space, challenge key assumptions within gender studies and feminist theory? And what can a scrutiny of the current debates on the relationship between Islam and feminism tell us about the broader socio-cultural structurings and processes through which the relationship between religion and secularism, the private and the public, minority and majority, are currently being re-configured?

### **Interpretations of Islam today**

Since the advent of Islamic activism in the late 1970s, the main discourse of "Islam"

in the west has been one of a dichotomy between “Islamism” (or “fundamentalism”) and “moderate” or “liberal” Islam. Each concept has been given a more or less clear understanding, and Muslims have faced a placement into one or the other of these categories. But when such “analysis” has been brought down to the empirical level, it has become more and more difficult to apply such a broad dichotomy to actual actors. One observer’s “radical” or “Islamist” may be another observer’s “moderate” or “liberal”. The confusion has sometimes been ascribed to obfuscation and double-talk by the actors, but it has more often to do with a lack of clarity of what we mean by those terms, and perhaps also with the suspicion that such dichotomies often hide more than they reveal.

There is therefore a need to continuously refine our analytical apparatus for understanding Islam and Muslim interpretations of it. We have rejected Orientalism and essentialist ideas of Islam’s “core”. But we must go further and, on the basis of actual cases, try to come up with ways of understanding the positions held by the various actors and groups that hold an Islamic discourse or refer to an Islamic practice.

These discourses and practices are diverse, in the Muslim world and in the West. Many refer to the need for “re-interpretation” or *ijtihad* of Islamic dogma or practice, or the need to re-focus on the ethical basis of Islam. But how is this ethical basis conceived? What is to be the limitations of *ijtihad*? And what are bases for carrying out this interpretation? Should it be limited to a reopening of methods utilized by the early Muslims to come up with new answers? Or should it be a more radical historicization of the sources themselves, with an opening of rejecting their apparent meaning in favour metaphorical interpretation, or even simply a new formulation of a Muslim ethic that alone should inform Muslim practice? Often, to be most “fundamentalist” in the meaning of focusing on the original texts may open for the most “adaptationist” interpretations. And what is the importance of the context within which the interpreter operates? In a world where ethical and political ideas cross religious and cultural boundaries, is the *ijtihad* a reflection of these outside influences or a rejection of them?

The focus on this part of the course is thus neither on Islamism per se, or on “liberal” Islam, but on the span of current conceptions of Islam, as well as on the historical antecedents that inform them. It will focus both on practice and on discourse. A particular emphasis will be laid on that normative source that is the Shari’a, as the ideas of Islamic law will often show the practical implications of the religious ideas, and how they are transformed into a social consequence. Linked naturally to this will also be the discussion of human rights, both of which topics will link this part of the course to the other part, on Islam and feminism.