Eighth Annual Conference
Religion and Socio-Cultural Transformation: European Perspectives and Beyond.
8th-12th July 2025
Vienna

Panel Title: A Culture of Certainty: Islam, Knowledge, and the Search for Truth in Unstable and Uncertain Times
Proponent: Claire Gallien, cg858@cam.ac.uk
Date : 11/07/2025
Location : Lecture Hall 21

Panel Presentation:

سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَـٰتِنَا فِى ٱلْءَافَاقِ وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ

We shall show them Our signs in the farthest horizons and in themselves, until it
becomes clear to them that this is the Truth...
Quran, sura Fuṣṣilat, 41:53

Since after World War 2, Europe has embraced what critical theory and philosophy described as a postmodern condition, marked by relativism in identities and values, fluidity, ambiguity, irony, disenchantment, and anti-foundational thinking. Postmodernism was also intended to function as a rebuttal to the myth of the universal truth of a single Eurocentric historical narrative, and as such joining ranks, at least on this particular aspect, with postcolonial theory. However (and quite ironically given its anti-foundationalism, hermeneutic pluralism, and anti-universalism), the military, economic, and epistemic hegemony of the Global North meant that postmodernism as an ontological and epistemic condition imposed itself as the new global narrative.

To any believers, Jean-François Lyotard's definition of postmodernity as 'incredulity towards metanarratives' in his seminal philosophical work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) is counterintuitive and problematic. Indeed, theology as 'God-talk' (Chittick) constitutes precisely this meta- (i.e. transcendent) narrative. In addition, from the perspective of believers,

postmodernity's anti-foundationalism, relativism, and disenchantment constitute untenable stances. Faith in God and the cosmovision as well as the episteme that ensues from this belief, necessitates the exact opposite, namely the support of scriptural foundations, clear demarcations between the ugly and the beautiful, between the harmful and the beneficial, and a perception of the world as God's creation, to be preserved as His gift and re-enchanted as His signs.

Building on recent works in Islamic studies which have demonstrated how Islam proposes a conception of the secular that is not anti-religious (Sherman Jackson), of religion that is not anti-modern (Irfan Ahmad), and of ambiguity that is not nihilistic or sceptic in its ambitions (Thomas Bauer), this panel is interested to explore Islam as 'a culture of certainty'.

As a rejoinder to Bauer's insightful investigation of Islam as 'a culture of ambiguity', panellists pursue various venues of enquiries, including the definition of knowledge in Islam, its limits, foundations, tools, and claims; the concepts of certainty and 'anti-vagueness' (Zamboni) in Islamic theology and philosophy; the removal of uncertainty in language, perception, and rational enquiries; the interplay between questions of certainty and truth and questions of genres and disciplines, namely what does 'certainty' mean across the fields of *kalām*, *fiqh*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, *uṣūl al-hadith*; the relation between certainty and mysticism, between clear speech and poetry…

Islamic scholars, luminaries and mystics from the past (and present!), their works and the theological projects they contributed to, shall not be examined as 'objects' of historical study. Rather, we are interested in them as points of reference and as interlocutors for further developments in contemporary Islamic theology. What does it mean to posit, reclaim, problematise Islam as a 'culture of *wise* certainty' and how does this culture may repair and positively transform inner-selves and contemporary societies?

Each speaker presents for 20/25 min + 10/15 min Q&A

WELCOME 9.00

SESSION 1
Chair: Lejla Demiri (Tübingen University, lejla.demiri@uni-tuebingen.de)

9.15-10.30
Full name: Yunus Hentschel
Institutional Affiliation: ERC Research Project VISIONIS - Vision and Visuality in the Qur'ān and Early Islam at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Email: yunus.hentschel@gmail.com
Title: Muqātil b. Sulaymān's Vision of the Prophets' Endeavor for Certainty.
Abstract

This talk investigates the early Qur'ān exegesis of Muqātil b. Sulaymān who lived in the turbulent period of socio-political transition from the Umayyads to the Abbasids. I analyze his interpretations of selected Qur'ānic presentations of the prophets, their struggles, responses to difficulties, and searches for certainty. Further, I discuss Muqātil's stances on the prophets in light of his theological leanings of the irjā' – the postponing of judgement regarding religious and ethical transgressions of others. In this, Muqātil highlights self-accountability and forgiving as prime qualities for the believers in following the prophetic examples.

Full name: Francesco Omar Zamboni
Institutional Affiliation: Tübingen University
Email: francesco.o.zamboni@gmail.com
Title: Dissolving the Fog. Anti-Vagueness with and beyond Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī
Abstract
This presentation will explore the concept of anti-vagueness and some of its implications, taking its departure from multiple statements scattered throughout Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d.1210) oeuvre.
Vagueness is a situation where something's limits appear indeterminate or, in other words, a situation that admits of borderline cases. In the domain of objects, one may think of a cloud (where are the limits of a cloud?). In the domain of properties, stock examples mention imprecise concepts of quantity (being bald, being a heap) or quality (being red).
Anti-vagueness is a specific metaphysical theory about vagueness and how to do away with it. Vagueness is unreal. Cases of vagueness that appear real are merely misapprehended combinations of more fundamental, non-vague phenomena. This can be shown via the method of analytic reduction: whenever a predicate appears to hold vaguely of a subject, both are analyzable into distinct aspects such that each aspect of the predicate holds non-vaguely of one aspect of the subject.
Rāzī deploys anti-vagueness in three main domains, meaning knowledge, difference, and change. The presentation will draw some of the most important entailments following from the application of analytic reduction to these domains, and then explore whether Rāzī's anti-vagueness can explain the subjective experience of vagueness.

BREAK 10.30-10.45

10.45-12.00
Full name: Natalie Kraneiß
Institutional Affiliation: Münster University
Email: n.kraneiss@uni-muenster.de
Title: Verification (*taḥqīq*) as Religious and Epistemic Practice: Establishing Certain Knowledge about Prophetic Descent in the Islamic West
Abstract

In Muslim societies, descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad enjoyed a special status and were often granted privileges and financial benefits. However, as the number of purported prophetic descendants grew, it became necessary to control access to their privileges and to verify claims of belonging to this distinguished group. In the 17th and 18th centuries, at a time of political unrest and uncertainty, this process of verification took on a new urgency in the Maghrib, in present-day Morocco. This raises the question of the methods and criteria by which certain knowledge about prophetic descent was established and legitimized.

Focusing on Sulaymān b. Muḥammad al-Ḥawwāt (d. 1816), a Moroccan literary scholar, genealogist, and descendant of the Prophet, this paper examines his engagement with the verification of such claims in the 18th century. What epistemic practices did al-Ḥawwāt employ to produce certain knowledge in an age of increased uncertainty? One of his major projects was to investigate the lineage of the descendants of the Iraqi scholar and saint ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166) in Fez, to whom prophetic descent was attributed. This endeavor, presented as verification (taḥqīq), involved the critical examination of information from books, letters, and documents, as well as the systematic and thoughtful evaluation of various forms of evidence.

This paper shows how knowledge was understood by the author as a dynamic and processual concept capable of stabilizing both social and religious order. While aiming to establish certain knowledge, al-Ḥawwāt's writing also reflects an awareness of the limitations of human knowledge, illustrating the balance between certainty and ambiguity in Islamic thought. Religious obligation was what drove al-Ḥawwāt in his quest for verification. At the same time, he emphasized that reliable and accurate knowledge is a central foundation for stability and order in society, especially in times of political and social uncertainty.

Full name: Besnik Sinani
Institutional Affiliation: Tübingen University
Email: bs1387@nyu.edu
Title: Scripturalist Certainty in Modern Muslim Thought: Nasir al-Din al-Albani's Epistemology of Prophetic Teaching

Abstract
The late hadith scholar, Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999), has been often depicted in contemporary scholarship as an 'iconoclast' (Hamdeh), largely due to the challenge he posed against pre-modern Muslim schools of thought, and pre-modern structures of scholarly authority. However, in a time marked by loss of confidence in canonical sources (Brown), al-Albani successfully articulated for vast Muslim publics an epistemology of scripturalist certainty grounded on the collected statements of Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*), texts that have constituted the very nexus of modern contentions over Muslim scripturalist sources, interpretative methods, and authority. What are the features of his *sunna* – grounded approach, and its significance in modern Muslim thought and practice? How does his larger argument over divine guidance and the role of prophetic

speech inform modern religious understandings of prophetic testimony? In this paper, we seek to address these questions as part of a larger exploration on the function of prophetology, religious conviction, and accessibility of divine guidance.

LUNCH BREAK 12.00-13.30

SESSION 2
13.30-15.30
Chair: Amal Awad (Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, aaa84@cam.ac.uk)
Full name: Easa Saad
Institutional Affiliation: Wolfson College, University of Oxford
Email: easa.saad@wolfson.ox.ac.uk
Title: Rūmī's Paradoxical Certainty: The Path of Knowledge And Love
Abstract

In his Masnavi-yi Ma'navi, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmi (d.1273) describes a cosmology in which the path to God is laced with paradox and oppositions, in part because God Himself has a dual nature—He has aspects pertaining to His Majesty (Jalāl) and His Beauty (Jamāl). In the realm of manifestation, these aspects often come into conflict and appear as oppositional or even paradoxical. But, for Rumi, these paradoxes in God and the cosmos do not lead us to ambiguity, relativity, or uncertainty. Rather, they signal the need to move beyond the theoretical and propositional towards the life of embodied spiritual practice, where the interplay of oppositional pairs becomes an important part of achieving spiritual felicity. Through analyzing relevant passages from the Masnavi, I will explore Rumi's conceptualization of the oppositional pair of God's comparability (tashbīh) and His incomparability/transcendence (tanzīh), which, for Rumi, are related to two modalities of knowing—through love and through knowledge. I will examine how, for Rumi, the interplay between these oppositional pairs does not reflect an irreconcilable or contradictory reality, but one in which ultimate certainty lies beyond the union of opposites.

Full name: Mohammed Tayssir Safi
Institutional Affiliation: Northwestern University
Email: mohammed.safi@northwestern.edu
Title: The Epistemic Status of Scripture Between Spinoza and the Falāsifa
Abstract

A central question in philosophy of religion is the question of epistemic priority between reason and revelation. Debates surrounding this topic have resulted in several different views concerning the epistemic status of revelation. This paper compares and analyzes four views from four historical figures: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, Abū ʿAlī Ibn Sīna, Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Rushd, and Baruch Spinoza. While all four figures take a "philosophical religion" approach to the question,

comparing them illuminates important epistemic differences. After the initial comparison, I present a weak and a strong view of the epistemic status of revelation on their "philosophical religion" approach. I then proceed with an epistemic analysis and critique of each view. I conclude the paper by arguing that although different from one another in substantive ways, both views render scripture epistemically unreliable and thus fail to make sense of its epistemic value.

Full name: Muhammad Sami
Institutional Affiliation: Oxford University
Email: muhammad.sami@theology.ox.ac.uk
Title: Why Rationalisms Fail? An Akbarian Account of Certain Knowledge
Abstract

The Qurʾan is replete with condemnation of uncritical acceptance of inherited doctrines and exhortations to have an unwavering conviction in its veracity. This dual imperative spurred philosopher theologians to explore the nature of belief, distinguishing its commendable from its condemnable forms. Central to these explorations was the question of certain knowledge: its nature, locus, and causes. The definition of knowledge, however, remained elusive. For Akbarian philosopher theologians, this is because of the rationalist manner in which the question is approached. Rationalism in this instance being the the view that knowledge in its highest form is graspable by reason.

Akbarians distinguish between the heart (*qalb*) and reason (*ʿaql*), making the former the locus of true knowledge. Like their rationalist interlocutors, they take it to be the case that the epistemic and the ontological realms are related. Yet they distinguish themselves by the way in which they establish such a relation. This paper points to the manner in which the relationship between both realms is established, showing how it is rooted in the Akbarian formulation of the relationship between essence and existence (*wujūd*). It argues that the problems faced by rationalisms arise from their ontology in which essences are fundamental. In an Akbarian ontology where *wujūd* is fundamental, the essential link between knowledge and existence is established, tying both domains inextricably together and establishing the ontological grounds for certain knowledge.

I conclude with reflections on the place of this conception in the history of philosophy and whether it can help open up new possibilities for contemporary thought.

BREAK 15.30 – 15.45

SESSION 3 – 15.45-17.45
Chair: Christian Schlenker (Geneva University, christian.schlenker@unige.ch)
Full name: Hiroaki Kawanishi

Institutional Affiliation: Tübingen University
Email: alihiroaki1993@gmail.com
Title: Certainty in Islamic Theology. *A Reflection on Early Modern Islamic Apocalypticism*

Abstract

To what extent can we attain certainty in Islamic epistemology? Among various theological subjects, the end of the world has convinced premodern Muslim theologians of its certain realisation in their own times as its imminence is prophesised in the Qur'an and Hadith traditions. From early on, Muslim scholarship has engaged with apocalypticism although none of them has known when it will take place except God. Despite this premodern scholarly engagement, contemporary scholarship has paid little attention to the subject of apocalypticism. Particularly, existing research has exclusively examined the issue in medieval times, leaving early modern scholarly engagement ignored. Addressing this gap, this study will examine three early modern apocalyptic treatises written by Muḥammad al-Usṭūwānī (d. 1072/1661), Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Rasūl al-Barzanjī (d. 1103/1691), and Niyāzī-i Miṣrī (d. 1105/1694). By investigating these early modern treatises, this research will argue that apocalypticism drew the serious attention from Muslim theologians across times and places, demonstrating apocalypticism as an urgent issue to be undertaken in their living realities. Further, by situating these forgotten treatises within the broader context of Islamic apocalypticism, this research aims to offer new insights into contemporary theological discourse of apocalypticism, focusing on how early modern Muslim theologians contemplated and theologised the imminence of the end of the world.

Full name: Christoph Rogers
Institutional Affiliation: Goethe University Frankfurt
Email: rogers04c@gmail.com
Title: The Surplus Of (Un-)Certainty: A Deleuzian Reading Of The ʾisnād Paradigm

Abstract

This paper examines the *ʾisnād* paradigm through Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition, focusing on the Isrāʾ and Miʿrāj narratives. Drawing on Herbert Berg's concept of *ʾisnād* as a "ritual praxis of cultural memory," it applies Deleuze's first two syntheses of time: habit and memory. It then explores knowledge transmission in Islam as open to a non-propositional truth event. The Isrāʾ and Miʿrāj accounts present a paradox: they are hors-série (P. Nwyia), depicting solitary experiences of the Prophet, not witnessed by others, yet the source of overabundant transmissions. They also exemplify *taṣdīq*, with Abu Bakr's unwavering acceptance in the *sīra* making testimony foundational to epistemic authority in the umma. This tension—between an ineffable experience (lack) and an excess of transmissions (surplus)—is encapsulated in Qurʾān 17:1, both an anchor and a site of meaning-making. It reflects the ambiguity between deriving certainty through *mutawātir* transmissions and S. Ahmed's concept of polycentric meaning-making. Applying Deleuze's concept of habit, the *ʾisnād* emerges as a

series of repetitions contracting differences into a self-conserving present. In light of the second synthesis, the *ʾisnād* folds past testimonies into a synchronic web of enunciations. But conserving temporal difference implies the generative force of a third moment: a past that never was present. Thus, the *ʾisnād* does not merely transmit knowledge but generates it through ritualized repetition, revolving around an expressed yet non-propositional event. The *ʾisnād* derives authority from the umma, where knowledge is authenticated collectively. As Rosenthal notes, "the totality of knowledge was known only to the totality of men." Yet, what if this totality is open and incomplete, with each enunciation introducing the surplus of an unknown? This paper suggests this surplus is already embedded in the Qurʾān, reflecting the tension between its pre-canonical form and the codified *muṣḥaf*.

Full name: Claire Gallien
Institutional Affiliation: Cambridge Muslim College & Divinity Faculty, Cambridge University
Email: cg858@cam.ac.uk
Title: The Truth Hidden from the Eye. Restating the Epistemic Value of Miracles Today
Abstract
The question of miracles is a vexed area of enquiry. Miracles are the keystones of the entire Islamic religious system and believing in them is one of the tenets of faith. The Qur'an, Sunna, and *kalām* texts detail their nature, their bestowal on prophets, and their epistemic value as direct manifestations of the divine. More broadly, the literature of miracles found across many Islamic disciplines cover the question of the Qur'anic revelation as miracle, of prophetic *muʿjizāt*, their functions in establishing the veracity of prophecy, of saintly *karamāt*, and the believers' quest in partaking of divine 'openings'.
And yet, the notion of miracle has been used and abused under modernity, with a 'regime of truth' (Foucault) that recognised scientific positivism and the separation of theology from 'scientific' pursuits as its core values, and under postmodernism, with its anti-foundationalist, relativist, and disenchanted epistemology. In such a context, miracles have been turned into myths to be studied or pleasant and marvellous stories to be enjoyed.
This paper argues, in light of recent discussions on the 'interface theory of perception' (Hoffman) in cognitive neuroscience, that believers would be much mistaken to relegate miracles to an obsolete epistemic age. I propose first to return to works of *kalām* so as to understand how miracles are conceptualised in Islam. I then turn to current debates in cognitive neuroscience and discuss their conclusions of the existence of Truth hidden from our eyes.
However, given their Darwinian framework and postulate that the Truth behind the 'interface' cannot be reached, I expose the fundamental differences between the Islamic and neuroscience cosmologies, in particular by looking at how Sufi literature discusses reception to disclosures. Ultimately, this paper restates the

epistemic function of miracles for an age aching to move past the postmodern condition.