Animal Rights in a Medieval Islamic Fable (HIST 2123)

Credit Hours: 4

Instructor: Tehnyat Majeed

Schedule: Monday to Friday (2.00 PM – 4.50 PM)

This course examines a unique text called The Animals Case against Humanity before the King of the Jinns, a fable that formed the longest section of the 10th-century encyclopedic work the Rasa’il Ikhwan al-Safa written by a group of anonymous Basran scholars. This piece is a critique of man’s self-arrogated status as ashraf al-makhluqat in the cosmos and of his relationship with nature in particular related to animal rights, ecological issues and environmental concerns. While the course focuses on this single text, it simultaneously uses supplementary sources to situate it in its historical milieu and to contextualize it within modern times. The issues raised during this trial where the animals are the plaintiff seeking remedy for the maltreatment they have received at the hands of humans, are as relevant today as they must have been centuries ago.

Importantly, through this story we also look at how this relationship between man and animals is framed within religious belief. Indeed, the Quran contains chapter titles dedicated to animals and even insects and thus urges the human to respect all creation. So, what are the implications of man’s status as vicegerent of God on earth? In this trial between animals and humans both parties draw on Quranic verses to support their position. The significance of non-human creation is further heightened in today’s world where something as tiny as a microbe called Covid19 has forced man’s gargantuan industries to a full stop. We are being made to realize our relationship with nature, the cosmos and all aspects of creation. Thus, this text that is both thought-provoking and conceptually imaginative, serves a valuable function in raising our awareness about treatment of animals and our responsibilities towards Gaia – mother earth, as humanity’s survival is now at stake. Due to its inherent universal nature and message, this treatise, The Animals Case against Humanity was translated into several languages over the centuries. It had a considerable appeal in western Islamic lands where its interfaith and multicultural tones resonated strongly within the pluralistic society of al-Andalus. One of the earliest surviving translations of this animal fable was commissioned by a French Christian king in 1316 and carried
out by a Jewish scholar. The distinctive dialogues characterizing different species of animals and the supernatural panel of jury -- the representatives of the Jinn, make this text suitable not only for recitation but also for a theatrical production. For this reason, the coursework will focus on analysing the text to make it adaptable for a theatrical script. Simultaneously, it will also emphasize a deeper understanding of different animal species, their nature, behaviours and ecology. It will examine its historical, philosophical and metaphysical frameworks while attempting to make it relevant for a contemporary audience through a number of compositional exercises including writing, visual storyboarding and reviewing musical scores.