



Study of Religion
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



Call for Abstracts – International Conference and Publication

Bridging the Gap – Texts, Commentaries and the new Audience

Mohammad Gharaibeh, Asad Q. Ahmed, and Walid Saleh

The study of commentaries (*sharḥ*, *ḥawāshī*, *nukat*) has steadily increased in recent years. Yet many aspects of this genre of scholarly writing, its function and its context need further research. Why did commentary become the preferred mode of authoring, across almost all the scholarly disciplines in medieval Islam? While commentators could have chosen to write a “non-commentarial” text, they preferred to elaborate their ideas on the basis of an earlier text. One of the reasons behind the popularity of this mode of writing was that commenting itself suited a professional professorial class of scholars who needed to keep a discipline grounded on common accepted texts. The commentator was a mediator *par excellence*, keeping a text relevant, both by commenting on it and adding to it, and by connecting that text to the ever-changing *environment* that studied it. With that, a commentator both confirmed the intellectual and social significance of the base text, while at the same time bridging the gap between the base text and the changing *audience*, playing the role of an intermediary between them.

This workshop puts into focus the complicated *intellectual intermediary role* of commentators in a social setting. In this role, commentators embarked on different intellectual activities. They rephrased the original text or explained complicated concepts and sentences; they rearticulated the intentions of the author of the base text by stating them anew in new language. They evaluated the ideas and concepts of the text, discussed them, refuted them, or bolstered them. They invariably developed new concepts and ideas and enlarged to scope of the text beyond its original framework. Sometimes, commentarial works even seem to take a radical new position, a new stance, such that researchers might pose the question as to why the commentator chose to comment on a base text in the first place, instead of authoring an ‘independent’ work by himself? Why was commenting so foundational to the scholarly enterprise *in a socio-intellectual context*?

The intermediary role of commentators draws the attention of the researcher also to the audience to whom the commentator speaks. The different intellectual activities that a commentator embarks on are meant to meet the expectations of and to ‘explain’ the base text to the changed audience. Not only is the commentator himself a part of the changing audience, it also constitutes the social and intellectual setting against which the commentary unfolds its true potential and function. Whether the commentary is meant to challenge the base text, to agree with it, to bring something new or combine various traditions can only be understood fully in the light of the audience. Hence, questions such as the following ones help to understand the commentary and its function better. Who are the teachers, students, colleagues, and rivals of the commentator? What is the body of knowledge that the social group perceives as significant? In what situation was the commentary produced, read, and received? Is the intellectual activity bound to a specific location or institution? Was the base text authored within a specific intellectual school while the commentator and/or his audience belong to another?

These questions pertaining to the role of the commentator as intermediary and the audience as a motive force of knowledge production demand new assessments. Put differently,



Study of Religion
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



we are interested in exploring how the textual dynamism of the commentary is conditioned by the social aspects of commentarial production. The workshop will seek to open the debate about the status and function of commenting, the role of the commentator as an intermediary and the audience to whom the commentator speaks.

Call for Abstracts

Papers are welcome that focus on a commentary or a commentary tradition consisting of several commentarial writings (*sharḥ*, *ḥāshiya*, *nukat*). They should highlight the role of the commentator as the intermediary between the base text and the changed audience. The conference is open with regard to the fields of Islamic studies, such as Islamic Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *ḥadīth*, Qur'ān commentaries (*tafsīr*), Grammar, Medicine, Philosophy, Logic, Kalām, Ṣūfism etc. For a better comparison of the case studies, we invite abstracts focusing on pre-modern and modern periods and on different regions.

Abstracts of between 300 and 500 words shall be send no later the **February 15th** to mohammad.gharaibeh@hu-berlin.de.

Organization:

The conference will be organized in cooperation by Mohammad Gharaibeh, Asad Q. Ahmed, and Walid Saleh. The conference will take place in Berlin **July 27th–30th 2023**. Expenses for travel and accommodation will be covered by the chair for Islamic Intellectual History at the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Time Frame

- Please submit proposals by **February 15th, 2023**, including the title of the contribution and an abstract of about 300-500 words.
- We might organize a preparatory workshop (online) before the conference to exchange ideas, expectations and concepts in April or May 2023
- Conference takes place in Berlin **July 27th–30th 2023**