CMEN18, Exploring Religion in Contemporary Middle Eastern Societies.
7.5 credits.

Religion remains a key factor in Middle Eastern societies, thoroughly affecting public debates, political structures, power mechanisms, gender relations and identity processes. This course provides an opportunity to explore such processes from theoretical as well as empirical perspectives. How do religious norms, debates and practices interrelate with broader socio-economical and politico-strategic factors? And how can we study and evaluate the broader effects of religious discourse and practice (and the critique thereof) in its emergent manifestations?

With a point of departure in the modernization and reform processes of the mid-19th century and the independence movements and revolutionary upheavals of the 20th century, the course particularly focuses the period since the end of the Cold War. We will explore the role of religious discourse and mobilization as an aspect of increasing geopolitical and strategic complexity; of globalization and current socio-economic developments; and as effects of migration flows and urban transformations. Geographically, the course will focus on the Arabic speaking world, Israel, Turkey and Iran.

Through a joint reading of scholarly work and a varied empirical material, we will attempt to analyze the current trajectories and debates of religion in modern and late modern society. The course is seminar based, inviting active participation and joint exploration rather than monologue and lectures. The course provides opportunities for individual specialization, as well as discussions and presentations in larger or smaller groups.

Central concepts for such assessments are secularism, modernism, theocracy, sectarianism, conservatism, reformism, orthodoxy, radicalism and proselytism. How do influential thinkers and activists interpret such concepts? How are they employed in political organizations, social movements, campaigns, strategies, political programs and constitutions? And what are the effects of such applications on geopolitical, national as well as local levels? The course will specifically highlight processes and relations of power. How do religious narratives interrelate with control, disciplinary mechanisms and repression – while sometimes also providing a venue for critique of hegemonies and hierarchies? How do religious discourses and constructions intersect with legal provisions, ethnic categorizations, gender relations, sexual norms and processes of identity?

Such perspectives will be explored through a rich and varied empirical material. It ranges from written as well as visual and digital texts, to arts and consumer culture. Apart from religio-political texts such as constitutions and organizational outlets, the course will consider emerging orchestrations of religious norms, in spheres such as fashion, music, street arts and cultural institutions, exploring how such expressions are resulting in a less formal but no less significant disciplining of public space. In short: what innovative perspectives on the changing roles and forms of religion can we apply, in order to better assess the complex roles of religious discourse and practice in contemporary Middle Eastern societies?