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# Conference: ‘Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam’.

## University of Göttingen, 27–31 May 2009

Paradise and the afterlife are among the key issues of Islamic religiosity. For centuries, Muslim scholars have been contemplating the many *ayas* in the Qur’an that speak to these themes while attempting to achieve a better understanding of such topics as the fate and condition of individual souls after death, the nature of the afterlife, the resurrection of the dead to face divine judgement, and the signs and portents that will precede the Last Days. In modern times, Paradise is sometimes used as a metaphor by secular thinkers to express their vision of a just and prosperous society within an Islamic framework. Suicide bombers, on the other hand, often refer to themselves as martyrs who are promised eternal reward in the afterlife.

The international symposium, ‘Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam’, convened at the University of Göttingen, Germany, was concerned with analysing these and other important features of Islamic thought. The five-day conference, held in May 2009, was organised and chaired by Sebastian Günther, Director of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Göttingen, and Todd Lawson, Professor of Islamic Thought at the University of Toronto. The meeting offered a unique opportunity to discuss some of the most salient issues of Muslim eschatology and to relate them to the religious and socio-political matrix in which they appeared. More than 60 prominent Islamicists and young scholars of Islam from Europe, North America and the Middle East took part in the conference. Participants represented a broad variety of cultural and religious backgrounds, providing for an exciting and unique exchange of perspectives based on the common ground of academic principles.

At the opening ceremony, held in the medieval Lecture Hall of the State and University Library of Göttingen, Sebastian Günther welcomed participants on behalf of the organisers while Reinhard Kratz, Professor of Theology and Director of the Centrum Orbis Orientalis, greeted the gathering on behalf of the President of the University of Göttingen, Kurt von Figura. Galal Elegemeie, Cultural Counsellor of the Embassy of the Arabic Republic of Egypt in Germany, then conveyed the best wishes of Mahmoud Zakzouk, Egyptian Minister of Religious Affairs to the participants. At the ceremony’s conclusion, Professor Emeritus Tilman Nagel (University of Göttingen) delivered the distinguished inaugural lecture, ‘Paradise Lost’. Based on a close reading of certain Qur’anic passages and an analysis of such texts as *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya* by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1567), Nagel stressed the fact that in

Islam, the boundaries between this world and the hereafter are often blurred. He demonstrated, on the basis of the work mentioned above, that events which are supposed to happen in the next world are sometimes already foreshadowed in the here and now or, indeed, that they even occur 'beforehand' in this world.

Following Tilman Nagel's lecture, the first six conference papers were presented in two simultaneous panels. Panel 1, entitled 'Paradise and its Pleasures' (chaired by Stefan Wild, University of Bonn), opened with Asma Afsaruddin's (University of Notre Dame) paper, 'Dying in the Path of God: Martyrdom, Celestial Rewards, and the Construction of Moral Excellence'. Afsaruddin examined the development of the cult of martyrdom in Islamic thought, based on two Qur'anic statements that are often interpreted as promising celestial reward and paradisiacal pleasures for those who die in the path of God while defending Islam. In her presentation, she stressed the fact that the diversity of interpretations found in the exegetical literature has to be seen as an important corrective to such a cultic reverence for martyrdom suffered in battle. In his 'Paradise and Pasture', Jaako Hämeen-Anttila (University of Helsinki) compared the Qur'anic image of Paradise with scenes of nature found in pre-Islamic poetry and descriptions of gardens found in later works of Arabic literature. His paper studied the reciprocal influences between these texts vis-à-vis garden imagery. Finally, Nerina Rustomji (St John's University) in her 'Reconfigured Pleasures: Functions of Families and Servants in the Paradisiacal Household', analysed the structures of the paradisiacal household and the role of family, male servants and female companions, while highlighting an apparent dialectic between reuniting the various branches of the believer's family and the sensual pleasures promised to the believer in Paradise.

The second panel, 'Comparative Eschatology' (chaired by Josef van Ess, University of Tübingen), was dedicated to a discussion of concepts about Paradise and the afterlife in Islam and Christianity in comparative perspective. Sidney H. Griffith's (The Catholic University of America, Washington) 'St Ephraem the Syrian, the Qur'an, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology' explored the ongoing controversy about the Syriac origins of the word *hūrī* and the paradisiacal concepts connected with it, an issue notoriously taken up by Christoph Luxenberg. Focusing on the works of Ephraem the Syrian, Griffith suggested that Christian Aramaic texts offer a useful context for understanding the imaginative world of the Qur'anic Paradise. In her paper, 'The Messiah in Arabic Praise Poetry', Beatrice Gruendler (Yale University) presented an overview of the depictions of Jesus in selected Arabic poems. She showed that the Messiah is a many-faced figure in these texts, serving at times as an emblem of identification and at others as the object of polemics. Barbara Roggema (John Cabot University) discussed in her paper, 'The Ins and Outs of the Other World: The Interdependency of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Century Christian and Muslim Views on the Afterlife', texts that shed light on the inter-religious debates of the early °Abbāsīd period concerning Muslim and Christian concepts.

The second day of the conference commenced with Session 3, 'Visualising Paradise' (chaired by Osama Abi-Mershed, Georgetown University). In her contribution, 'Visualising Encounters on the Road to Paradise', Karin Ruehrdanz (University of Toronto) analysed images from the Persian and the Ottoman Empires that illustrate Paradise as the first abode of man, as the destination of privileged travellers and wayfarers, and as the final home of believers after the resurrection. Present-day paintings were addressed by Silvia Naef (University of Geneva) in 'Where is Paradise on Earth? Visual Artists from the Middle East and the Construction of a Mythic Past'. Naef explained how a largely stereotypical concept of a glorified past has been used by artists in the modern Middle East to construct a vision of a lost earthly Paradise that has profound implications for contemporary societies. In his paper, 'Issues of Vision and Visuality in Paradise', Simon O'Meara (American University of Kuwait) took up the issue of visuality, a concept that has been rarely applied to the field of Islamic art history. Based on a study of certain *ahādīth* concerning visuality in Paradise, O'Meara emphasised that the Muslim paradise is depicted as a place in which nothing is hidden, thus forming a clear contrast to the earthly life of the believers in labyrinthine medieval Muslim cities, which can be characterised as largely limiting the vision of their inhabitants by means of their architectural structure.

Complementing the papers on art history featured in Panel 3, the presentations in Panel 4 (chaired by Lutz Richter-Bernburg, University of Tübingen) examined the various ways of 'Travelling to Paradise'. First, Monika Mühlböck (University of Vienna) dealt with Islamic obligations and customs carried out in Muslim communities to ensure Paradise for a dying person in her contribution, 'Before Entering Paradise: Islamic Religious Norms and Cultural Traditions at the Point of Death'. In the second paper of the session, entitled 'Description of Paradise in Mi'raj narratives', Roberto Tottoli (University of Naples) analysed the traditions and descriptions of Paradise in works dedicated to the Night Journey and the Ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad and demonstrated the interesting fact that the wealth of ornate detail in such tales is actually a product of the pre-modern period. Focusing on one of the most famous books of medieval Italy, Samar Attar (Sidney) showed in her paper, 'An Islamic *Paradiso* in a Medieval Christian Poem: Dante's *Divine Comedy* Revisited', the extent to which Dante used Islamic sources to write his masterpiece. Furthermore, she discussed the question of why some Western scholars have been reluctant to study the clear connection between Islamic and Arabic civilisation on the most sophisticated and influential products of Christian European culture.

Session 5 was entitled 'Images, Symbols and Concepts of Eschatology' (chaired by Susanne Enderwitz, University of Heidelberg). The first paper, by Sebastian Günther (University of Göttingen), '*God does not disdain to strike a similitude* (Q. 2:26): Images and Symbols from Qur'anic Eschatology as Theological Axioms', explored

the Qur'anic portrayal of Doomsday, Paradise and Hell. By analysing the functions of similitudes, metaphors and figures of speech in Qur'anic descriptions of the Hereafter, Günther demonstrated how the relevant passages not only attest to a specific diction and aesthetics in treating a crucial theological creed of Muslim faith, but are also intended to serve a didactic purpose as well. Günther shed light on the ways in which medieval eschatological works illustrate the Qur'anic perceptions of Doomsday and the Hereafter and occasionally merge them with ideas from other religious systems such as Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Egyptian religious traditions. The discussion of Qur'anic paradisiacal imagery was continued by Andrew Lane (University of Toronto) in his paper, '*Robed in green garments of silk and brocade* (Q. 18:31): Qur'anic Imagery within Rationalist Exegesis'. Lane outlined how the more 'rationalist' thread of Qur'anic exegesis, associated with such commentators as al-Ṭūsī and al-Zamakhsharī, interpreted *ayas* in the Qur'an that employed rich imagery to speak about the Day of Judgement and the Hereafter. Finally, Fred Donner (University of Chicago) introduced 'A Typology of Eschatological Concepts', formulating a set of categories of basic features found in many eschatological schemes. Donner observed that polarities such as other-worldly versus this-worldly eschatologies, religious versus secular eschatologies, and moral versus amoral eschatologies function as primary categories in the description of eschatological concepts in various religious traditions.

'Considerations of the Hereafter in Literature and Art' was the topic of Panel 6 (chaired by Jens Scheiner, Free University of Berlin). In his paper, 'The Hereafter in Islamic Popular Imagery', Ulrich Marzolph (University of Göttingen) spoke about how popular Shī'ī depictions of Paradise and the Hereafter related to important events in Shī'ī history such as Karbala, and showed how these pictures are used as the backdrop for posters and murals produced in post-revolutionary Iran. Focusing on the narrative strategies of classical Islamic historiographers, Ghada Jayyusi-Lehn (American University of Sharjah) examined historical accounts about the caliphs on their deathbeds and highlighted the ways in which medieval authors used notions of Paradise and Hell to characterise important personalities of Islamic history. Her paper, 'The Death of a Caliph: Medieval Muslim Historians on Eschatology and Paradise', demonstrated how a critical reading of historical accounts can help determine the historian's biases. Taking the audience with her to Mamlūk Cairo, Tehnyat Majeed (The Cleveland Museum of Art) analysed in her paper, 'The *Char Muhammad* Inscription, *Shafa'a* and the Mamluk Qubba al-Mansuriyya in Cairo', the metaphysical and religious meaning of the *chār Muḥammad* inscription in the mausoleum of Sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn. Majeed discussed the profound relationship, both spiritual and physical, between this building and the Qubbat al-Ṣakhra in Jerusalem, a monument that is featured in some of the traditions about Resurrection and the Last Day of Judgement.

The papers of Panel 7, (consisting of two presentations and chaired by Martin Jagonak, University of Göttingen) examined '(Inter)-dependencies in Viewing the Other World'. The first contribution, Walid Saleh's (University of Toronto) 'Beyond al-Qazwini: Two Unstudied Mirabella Islamic Treatises and their Depiction of the Afterlife' provided a detailed discussion of two *'ajā'ib* or Mirabella texts by Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Ṣunhājī and Mar'ī ibn Yūsuf al-Karmī, which have so far been mostly neglected by Western scholars. Next, Alexey A. Khismatulin (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St Petersburg) drew attention to the Ahl-i Ḥaqq tradition in his paper, 'A Step from Paradise: *Barzakh* in the Ahl-i Haqq Teachings'. Khismatulin offered a vivid description of the intermediate world, focusing on the fate of the individual soul when entering and leaving the isthmus.

In Session 8 (chaired by Verena Klemm, University of Leipzig), participants heard three papers on the theme of 'Shi'i, Philosophical and Esoteric Contemplations of Paradise and the Eschaton'. In his '*And the Earth will shine with the light of its Lord* (Q. 39:69): *Qa'im* and *Qiyama* in Early Twelver Shi'ism', Omid Ghaemmaghami (University of Toronto) examined the eschatological role of the *qā'im*. Ghaemmaghami explored the implications of several traditions and reports found in early Shi'ī sources that declare the appearance of the *qā'im* to be the Day of Resurrection as opposed to an event that precedes it. Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (Institute of Ismaili Studies, London) concentrated in his paper, 'Spiritual Vision, Resurrection and the Adamic Drama Actualised: the Linguistic and Esoteric Understanding of the Afterlife in the Epistles of the Pure Brethren (*Rasa'il ikhwan al-ṣafa'*)', on the concepts of resurrection and spiritual vision put forward by the Brethren of Purity of medieval Iraq, explaining the ways in which this group understood religious language. The last paper in this panel, Elizabeth Alexandrin's (University of Manitoba) 'Paradise as the Abode of Pure Knowledge: Reconsidering al-Mu'ayyad's "Ismā'īlī Neoplatonism"', dealt with the paradisiacal concepts of al-Mu'ayyad, the important fifth/eleventh-century Ismā'īlī scholar. Special emphasis was laid on his understanding of the celestial rewards as being intellectual (as distinct from physical), while discussing the sources of his philosophical teachings.

The central topics of Panel 9: 'Paradise, Eschatology and Philosophical Speculations' (chaired by As'ad Khairallah, American University in Beirut) were philosophical reflections of resurrection, eschatology and the hereafter. In his paper, "'Being-Towards-Resurrection" as a Theme of Philosophical Shi'ism', Hermann Landolt (Institute of Ismaili Studies) reflected on the philosophy of existence laid down by the great Safavid-era polymath, Mullā Ṣadrā. Landolt situated Ṣadrā's speculations on 'bodily resurrection' in the rich tradition of Islamic mystical-philosophical thought, raising the question of what was 'Shi'ī' and what was 'philosophical' in the great scholar's thought. Next, Wilferd Madelung (Oxford University) showed in his 'al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Interpretation of Traditional Islamic Eschatology in his

*Masa'il al-Madnun*', how al-Ghazālī tried to reconcile traditional Islamic dogmas about the resurrection and the hereafter with the doctrines of the philosophers. Madelung explained that in his still unpublished *Masā'il al-maḍnūn*, al-Ghazālī discussed eschatological dogmas like resurrection, the temporary recomposition of body and soul for questioning in the tomb, and the intercession of the Prophet, against the background of Avicennan and frankly Aristotelian philosophical doctrines. The third paper of the panel by Thomas Würtz (University of Zürich) was entitled 'Emphasising the Orthodox Conception of the Hereafter: Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani's (d. 1390) Examination of Certain Mu'tazilite and Philosophical Objections'. Here, Würtz demonstrated how the Muslim scholar Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, whose work is still highly appreciated in the Islamic world, dealt with philosophical objections against orthodox Islamic eschatological convictions.

Session 10 (chaired by Lale Behzadi, University of Göttingen) was dedicated to descriptions of 'The Landscape and Composition of the Hereafter'. Ingrid Hehmeyer (Ryerson University, Toronto) showed in her 'The Configuration of the Heavens in Islamic Astronomy' how Islamic astronomy approached topics such as celestial motion and geometrical models of the heavens, thus establishing a rich and lively debate in the course of which advancements were made to explain the configuration of the heavens. In his paper 'al-Nahda's Paradise: Aesthetics and the Botanical Imagination in the Arabic Renaissance', Jens Hanssen (University of Toronto) analysed the botanical metaphors used in names of newspapers, journals and organisations during the early Arab renaissance, linking them to the general political and aesthetic reform discourse of this period.

Panel 11 (chaired by Irene Schneider, University of Göttingen), 'Paradise and Utopia', opened the third day of the conference. In his paper, 'Proximities to Paradise', Jamel Velji (University of California, Santa Barbara) discussed the interplay between apocalypse and authority in the medieval Ismā'īlī tradition. In the following paper, 'Strategies of Paradise: Paradise Virgins and Utopia', Maher Jarrar shifted the focus back to Qur'anic descriptions of Paradise and undertook a detailed study of the *beautiful pure companions* and their reception in Muslim literature. He shed light especially on the rhetorical and allegorical usage of the Paradise virgins in various branches of Islamic thought, exploring the religious and social milieus in which this part of the Qur'anic paradisiacal narrative was deployed. Next, Ruth Mas (University of Colorado at Boulder) addressed 'Secular Utopias and Personal Paradises in Contemporary Islamic Thought' and demonstrated how contemporary Franco-Maghrebi Muslim intellectuals use elements of classical Islamic paradisiacal descriptions in the context of utopist notions of a heaven on earth based on secular liberal norms.

Session 12 (chaired by Karen Bauer, Institute of Ismaili Studies) focused on heterodox concepts of 'Reincarnation, Afterlife, and the Awaited Mahdi'. Mohammad Hassan

Khalil (University of Illinois-Champaign) introduced the audience to perceptions of 'Reincarnation in Islamic Thought' and outlined how certain Qur'anic statements could be reread by Ṣūfī interpreters to support ideas of reincarnation. Khalil also showed that it was possible to derive concepts of rebirth in Islam by discussing classical problems in theodicy. In his paper 'The Awaited Mahdī in the Works and Thought of Sunni Mystics: The Case of Ibn al-ʿArabī', Issam Eido (University of Damascus) examined how the famous Andalusian mystic perceived the Mahdī in his mystical system. Based on a close reading of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Eido posed the possibility that Ibn al-ʿArabī was convinced that the Mahdī would usher in a new religious system, as opposed to simply revivifying the Islamic Sharīʿa. Mystical concepts of the eschaton were also thematised by Shahzad Bashir (Stanford University) in his paper 'Paradise and Hell Materialised: Life and Afterlife in the Works of Fazlallah Astarabadi'. The Persian Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī, founder of the Ḥurūfī sect, set forth in his works what he thought to be the true esoteric meanings of Qur'anic pronouncements regarding the afterlife, defining his own time as an apocalyptic period characterised by a diminishing distinction between life and afterlife.

The conference program continued with Panel 13 (chaired by Arnim Heinemann, Free University of Berlin), which was dedicated to 'Myths and Motifs of Eschatology and the Hereafter'. The first presentation in this panel was 'Paradise as Apocalyptic Motif in the Quran' by Todd Lawson (University of Toronto). Lawson discussed the Paradise motif as part of a set of themes and topics in the Qur'an that constitute apocalypse as this literary genre has come to be examined and understood in religious and literary studies. Given the fact that scholarship of apocalypses has so far rarely taken note of Muslim textual, social and historical phenomena and expressions, Lawson's paper suggested new approaches and methods both for Qur'anic studies and for the study of apocalyptic in general. Feras Hamza's (American University of Dubai) paper described 'The Development of the Concept of "Temporary Hell" in Early Islam'. He showed how this concept found its way into the early Muslim orthodox theology of the early second/eighth century. As a motif with a likely Judaeo-Christian background, it faced resistance from 'scripturalists' within Muslim society, just as it was later the case with the concept of the eschatological intercession (*shafāʿa*) of the Prophet. Consequently, early Muslim theology preserves a controversial debate about the validity of these two concepts. The panel closed with Christian Lange's (University of Edinburgh) contribution, 'Taxonomy and Ideology: The Muslim Hereafter as Myth'. Lange explored the ways in which structuralist and post-structuralist models of analysing myth can be used to study Muslim narratives of Paradise and Hell.

Concepts of Paradise in Persian Ṣūfī traditions was the topic of Session 14 (chaired by Philip G. Kreyenbroek, University of Göttingen), entitled 'Paradise Through the Eyes



of the Mystics'. Katja Föllmer (University of Göttingen) illustrated in her 'Paradise through Spiritual Experience: The Mystical Way to God in 'Attar's Allegorical Work *The Conference of the Birds*' how the Persian Ṣūfī poet Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār deployed the idea of Paradise in his work. Mohammad Sadegh-Zahedi's (Imam Khomeini International University) paper focused on the 'The Concept of Paradise in Rumi's Thought', describing the mystical interpretation of Paradise offered by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. In her presentation 'A Paradise Above and Beyond the Janna', Maryam Moazzen (University of Toronto) introduced the audience to the descriptions and discussions of Paradise in the works of 'Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadhānī. She highlighted especially the centrality of ardent love in al-Hamadhānī's writings and meditations on Paradise.

In the afternoon, two papers on 'Popular Discourses about Paradise and the Afterlife' were presented in Panel 15 (chaired by Jens Peter Laut, University of Göttingen). Ludmila Hanisch (Berlin) traced the history of Islamic and Arabic studies in Göttingen and other major German academic centres in her 'Perceptions of Paradise in the Writings of Julius Wellhausen, Mark Lidzbarski and Hans Heinrich Schaeder'. Martin Rixinger's (University of Göttingen) paper 'Eschatology as Science Fiction – Resurrection, Doomsday, the Intermediate World and the Hereafter in Recent Nurcu Literature' demonstrated how concepts from Western popular culture such as works of science fiction or fringe movements such as parapsychology have found their way into contemporary Turkish Muslim thought on eschatology and the afterlife.

The conference's final panel was entitled, 'Paradise Meets Modernity' (chaired by Umar Ryad, University of Leiden). In her 'Expulsion from Paradise: Granada in Radwa Ashur's *Gharnata* (1994) and in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)', Suha Kudsieh (University of Toronto) analysed two depictions of Muslim ruled al-Andalus as an earthly Paradise juxtaposed with the bleak socio-political realities of the Middle East and India. Edwin Wieringa (University of Cologne) examined in his contribution, 'Paradise is in the Shadow of the Swords: Paradisical Imagery in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Acehnese War Propaganda', the paradisiacal motives in Acehnese literature vis-a-vis holy war against the Dutch and explored the ways Paradise is described as a stark contrast to life on earth. Finally, Liza Franke's (University of Leipzig) 'Notions of Paradise in Contemporary Palestinian Thought' shed light on the usage of Qur'anic paradisiacal concepts in present-day Palestinian discourse. Based on field work conducted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Franke demonstrated how images of the gardens of Paradise are used both in everyday communication and in the context of suicide operations.

Saturday, the fourth day of the conference, was dedicated to an excursion to the historic sight of Wartburg Castle and the nearby city of Eisenach.

On Sunday, in the concluding session (chaired by Todd Lawson and Sebastian Günther) the panel chairs of the conference summarised the major themes of their panels and commented briefly on the papers. It became clear that Islamic notions of eschatology and the afterlife, as seen by the various scholars, are remarkably varied and diverse. Taking the Qur'anic descriptions of Paradise, Hell and the eschaton as points of reference, Muslim religious thinkers and intellectuals of every period have arrived at their respective individual understandings of the fate of the deceased and the end of the world as we know it. While some of them occupied themselves with rational analysis and logical argumentation, others embarked on a mystical contemplation of a deeper understanding of this and the other world. Whereas some of the concepts they put down on paper can only be understood against the background of the religious history of the classical period, others reveal conversations between modern Western thought and classical Muslim meditations. Paradise and Hell have proven not only to be fascinating objects of religious scholarship, but attractive themes taken up by medieval and modern Muslim artisans and painters. Of course, notions of both earthly and otherworldly paradises are also among the topics most popular with 'Islamicate' writers through the ages. It was, moreover, obvious that questions about the afterlife and the end of the world cannot be separated from other important questions of human life and thought in general and religious speculation in particular.

After the plenary discussion, Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson expressed their gratitude to the conference participants for their contributions. They also acknowledged the contribution of the numerous student volunteers without whose assistance the conference would not have been possible. Finally, they took the opportunity to draw the participants' attention to the projected volume, 'Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam', which will include the conference proceedings and is scheduled for publication in 2010 as part of Brill's *Islamic History and Civilization* Series. Additional information about the conference can be found on the website of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Göttingen: [www.arabistik.uni-goettingen.de](http://www.arabistik.uni-goettingen.de).

CHRISTIAN MAUDER AND OMID GHAEMMAGHAMI



# مجلة الدراسات القرآنية

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ

المجلد الحادي عشر، العدد الأول

2009

مجلة علمية محكمة نصف سنوية  
يصدرها مركز الدراسات الإسلامية بكلية الدراسات الشرقية والإفريقية في جامعة لندن