Comparative Ancient Religions

Fall 2011

Question 1:
Describe the content and significance of: (a) al-Ghazali's The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahafut al-falasifah), and (b) Ibn Rushd's The Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tahafut al-tahafut). Then take a step back and address the engagement with philosophy in Christian thought. Discuss the influence of Christian thought on this Islamic philosophical discourse, and the process by which this stream of Christian thought emerged in late antiquity. Finally, discuss the influence of Islamic philosophical discourse on later Christian thought.

Question 2: Answer one of the following

A. Compare and contrast the concept of "Scripture" in the formative eras of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What explanation does each tradition give for the authority that Scripture possesses? Where does Scripture fit in with other sources of authority in establishing normative beliefs and practices? What conflicts emerge in establishing the boundaries and function of Scripture? How does the concept of Scripture change over time in each tradition?

B. Compare and contrast the nature of the religious community in Judaism, Christianity and Islam in their earliest centuries. What experiences are central to defining the community, and how does each tradition shape the memory of those experiences? How does the tradition negotiate the boundaries between insiders and outsiders in the community? What are the limits of deviation that are tolerable to the community, and how is that deviation defined?

Question 3: Address the following scenario:

You have been assigned to teach a course on "Pivotal Figures in History." Identify one figure from each Christianity and Islam that you will use in the course. Explain why you will use him or her in your course, and how these figures will contribute to the overall aims of your course. Discuss how the assessment of historians with respect to each figure has changed over time, and what has shaped these changes. Finally, explain what material you would include about or by each figure in the syllabus, and how you would structure the relevant assignments with respect to each figure.