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Challenges and Strategies for Teaching Mystical Texts: Part Two

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While teaching a mystical text is deeply enriching to the classroom, I find colleagues have two primary trepidations about teaching *The Conference of the Birds*: (1) presenting mysticism – a subject undergraduates and nonexperts alike often find impenetrable – in a coherent, lucid manner, and (2) accurately and responsibly discussing its specific Islamic context and dimensions (ʻAṭṭār 1984). Indeed, teaching undergraduates a mystical text requires a strong mastery of dense material and the ability to communicate ideas simply to so students understand their value for exploring identity. Thus, I have developed a set of strategies for elucidating mysticism to my students that I share with my colleagues who are not trained in mysticism. Along with my tips for teaching mysticism, I give recommendations for reliable sources for further reading on the Islamic context. Though readers of these blog posts may be experts in Sufism themselves or feel comfortable teaching mystical texts, I will address the concerns of complete beginners to both mystical texts and Sufi texts more specifically.

When introducing *The Conference of the Birds*, I first ask students to reflect on the fact that ʻAṭṭār seems to struggle to express himself. Students typically admit frustration with the text, calling it "confusing," noting that ʻAṭṭār frequently contradicts himself or says that something is impossible to write about (followed by a lengthy attempt to write about it). I affirm this observation, noting that mystical texts are full of paradox and confusing language. I then ask students why ʻAṭṭār might have so much trouble expressing himself. This question generally

leads to several theories: he is unsure of what he is talking about and working through the idea, he is a bad writer, and the subject matter (God) is particularly hard to describe. Each idea opens a great avenue for discussing the self – is it helpful to write when thinking through challenging ideas? What does this writing look like? What does "good" writing look like? Must it be neat and tidy? Is good writing interesting or productive writing? And finally, I ask students, "Can you think of anything that you know how to do, but would find hard to describe?" or "What is important to you that you would struggle to explain to someone else?" Inevitably, this question leads students to reflect on matters of faith, emotion, and embodied knowledge. We discuss ideas of mystical "unsaying" (as described by Michael Sells [1994]), and Kevin Corrigan's argument that paradoxical language is "the only thinkable and reasonable language" one can use to describe ultimate reality (2005, 169). By framing "confusing language" in these terms, I help students to understand how the ineffable – which permeates *The Conference of the Birds* and most mystical texts – is not only relevant to their lives, but essential. The conversation reveals that some of their most profound knowledge of self (i.e., emotional, embodied) is ineffable.

With this conversation in place, we discuss the notion of elite or intense spiritual practices and what type of person pursues such practices. To help students understand this concept, I give a silly metaphor. I tell my students that mystics are the marathon runners of religion. Just as nobody *has* to run a marathon, nobody has to be a mystic. Though one can be a casual runner and still find value in the practice, some people feel compelled to do more, and some feel the drive to do something extreme. We discuss what motivates people to run marathons, what value they find in training for and ultimately completing such an arduous task. This metaphor, though vastly oversimplified, helps first-year students to reflect on the nature of an intense journey and whether or not they are the kind of person who pursues such tasks. It also helps the poem feel more present. Before using the marathon metaphor, students would comment on how "unrealistic" the mystical path was and how it might have been okay "back then," but that nobody would do such a thing now (even after being told that the poem is still read in devotional contexts and that Sufi practice is very much alive and well). When I frame the mystical path with the marathon example, students are more likely to consider why they are not the type of person who would pursue the path advocated by ʻAṭṭār rather than dismiss those who are.

Moreover, the marathon comparison is useful for reflecting on the elite nature of mystical journeys throughout our reading of *The Conference of the Birds.* For example, students are often struck by how few birds survive at the end of the poem, a metaphor for reaching divine union. ʻAṭṭār claims that of the hundreds of thousands that set out, only thirty reach the Simorgh (1984, 235). At this point in the poem, many students are incredulous; why, they ask, would anyone endure such a difficult journey with the odds of success being so low? Here, we return to metaphor; I ask students to brainstorm about careers and goals that have a very low success rate. Over the years, students have thought up many things including: being a professional athlete, winning an Olympic gold medal, earning a spot in the New York City Ballet, and becoming the president. Such a conversation again gives space for reflection: do I have any ambitions that are this elite? Why or why not? Am I too afraid to fail and cutting

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myself short? Is there a level of satisfaction that people who achieve something with long odds feel that I cannot? Conversely, we challenge the reverence for such paths. Recently, we discussed Simone Biles's decision not to compete at an elite level due to the strain it placed on her mental health, and how pursuing such goals might damage one's relationships and sense of wellbeing.

Connected with the reflection on difficult journeys, the rhetoric of *The Conference of the Birds* offers a rich opportunity to help students consider their fears of letting go of the self. When discussing the valleys (which represent the stages of the Sufi path), I ask students to reflect on their emotional reactions. This has two functions. First, students seem more willing to engage in difficult reading when asked to reflect on their emotional reaction rather than more traditional analysis (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry 2002). Second, it generally surfaces that students feel anxious and fearful when reading about the loss of self. Yet when we engage in close reading, they observe that 'Aṭṭār uses tranquil language to describe loss of identity. This leads to reflection on why *they* feel so anxious about this idea when it is being presented beneficially. I ask: What if losing the self is a good thing? What changes about your perception of your identity if 'Aṭṭār is right? Connected to this question, our discussion of the valleys includes debating whether or not hardship and trial are necessary or destructive to identity. With the pervasive notion that hardship makes a person stronger, we talk about how to respond to difficulty in a way that builds strength. Inversely, I invite students to reflect on the notion that trauma, hardship, and "tough love" may ultimately damage self-development and identity.

While the mystical path and the type of person who pursues it can be presented with metaphor and well understood by undergraduates, I typically allow the discussion of divine union to remain more opaque. The final section of the poem describes the birds meeting the Simorgh as a metaphor for the notion of loss of self within God. This section is vivid and fascinating, but ultimately quite difficult for students to feel they fully understand. Here, it is helpful that we have already discussed how paradox may be the only appropriate language for such a concept, and that sometimes the most important knowledge is hard to explain to others. It is also a fruitful moment to discuss the question of embodied knowledge. I frequently ask my students: Are there any experiences that you do not fully understand if you have not had them? Examples that have come up have included childbirth, sexual experiences, seeing certain landscapes, and similar intense, embodied states. This conversation allows for reflection on what having such an experience means to one's sense of self and relationship with others.

The discussion of divine union also allows us to consider the possibility of universal human experience and transcending social, cultural, linguistic, and other barriers to reach a collective understanding of identity. When discussing the notion of a shared experience in my Augustine and Culture seminar (ACS), I simply ask students: Do you think all the birds experience the same thing when they meet the Simorgh? Why or why not? While at first many seem to believe in a different experience, when we discuss the concept of a universal experience, students often realize that their focus on the fixedness of social constraints makes them reluctant to believe such an experience is possible. Moreover, we discuss how the mediating factors that

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currently come to mind – typically race, gender, sexuality, and so forth – are likely not the social constraints that ʻAṭṭār imagined overcoming.

The ideas discussed above would work well with a number of mystical texts, but since these blog posts focus on *The Conference of the Birds*, I would like to offer a few remarks on some of the challenges a person may face teaching poems that are specific to the Islamic context. Because ACS is not focused on Islam, I typically offer the minimum context necessary to understand the text, but my colleagues have noted anxiety about properly situating it within its Islamic Sufi context. In his article on teaching Sufism, David Cook affirms such an anxiety, noting that Sufism is "a vast and complicated subject" that "requires a thorough knowledge and appreciation of Islamic culture" (2011, 96). Cook further comments on how the shortcomings of many popular introductions to Sufism present another obstacle to teaching Sufi texts well. The difficulty of the subject matter may leave a nonexpert feeling ill-equipped to discuss *The Conference of the Birds* with students.

However, my colleagues have become more comfortable by combining the approaches of introductory texts on Sufism. Since ACS is centered on primary-sources, my colleagues typically read this material for background and bring it into conversation in the classroom. In a religious studies or theology course where one assigns secondary literature, one could assign excerpts from the following texts either in advance of or alongside *The Conference of the Birds*. For background on Sufi theology and practice, and a discussion of the history of the academic study of Sufism, I point colleagues to Carl Ernst's *Shambhala Guide to Sufism.* For historical overviews, I suggest Ahmet Karamustafa's *Sufism in the Formative Period* and Nile Green's *Sufism: A Global Introduction*. Each book is reasonably short, easily accessible to nonspecialists, and works well in classroom discussion. I typically caution colleagues against using William Chittick's *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Garden of Truth* because their commitments to a theoretical approach known as Traditionalism make them misleading for a nonexpert. The historian Mark Sedgwick has argued that Traditionalist scholars present their worldview as facts about Islam rather than as a theoretical framework or mode of interpretation. Sedgwick believes that the primary harm of this approach is done to nonspecialists, for whom "neither the origin nor the questionable nature of [Traditionalist] interpretations is evident" (2004, 169).

Even with a greater familiarity with Sufism in place, the nonexpert may feel reticent to teach a Sufi text out of worry about its reception among contemporary Muslim students. In his classic work *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, Carl Ernst notes that when he tells his students that he studies Sufism, he is generally met with one of two reactions: either an assertion that Sufism is not "real" Islam, or delight and family stories about a Sufi grandfather (1997, xi). This comment is affirmed by Cook, who discusses responding to students who have asserted that Sufism is "not Islam" (2011, 98). Another possible reception is a Muslim student who is completely unfamiliar with Sufism, and thus does not recognize it as a part of their own tradition. I have also encountered Muslim students who challenged the legitimacy of Sufism in the classroom, and when I have shared this fact with colleagues, they often express trepidation about how to handle such a moment. I let them know that while many Muslim students will

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love the opportunity to read a Sufi text, it is important to be prepared for the possibility of Muslim students questioning the authenticity of Sufism.

Many colleagues find it reassuring to know some historical background and potential discussion questions that can turn "gotcha" moments into opportunities to reflect on religious identity. First, it is helpful to know that though Sufism emerges early in Islamic history at the center of theological orthodoxy, its legitimacy has been challenged from its inception. Anti-Sufi attitudes were revived following the colonial period in Muslim-majority countries, and early academic literature on the subject cast Sufism as a liberal sect contrary to "rigid" orthodox Islam (Schimmel 1975, 10-11**)**. Criticisms have been both that Sufism is not Islamic enough (as seen in early critiques and the influence of contemporary Wahhabi Islam), but also that it is not modern enough (from Muhammad 'Abduh and others). Given this history, it is often surprising for Muslim students to learn that in certain times and places in the medieval period, Sufism was considered fully orthodox Islam, and major theologians such as al-Ghazālī were practicing Sufis. Discussing the historical roots of modern critiques of Sufism is a powerful way to invite Muslim students who hold anti-Sufi biases to consider the source of such biases. The historical context described above is covered by Ernst (1997), but for a more thorough overview, I recommend Elizabeth Sirriyeh's *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defense, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*. Because our goal is to reflect on identity rather than imparting a historical knowledge of Islam and Sufism, we typically only bring in this background if directly challenged in class.

However, rather than simply telling a student that Sufism is "real" Islam, I find moments like this to be a great opportunity for all students to reflect on what they consider "real" iterations of whatever religion they practice. Connected to this question, I ask: Who has the authority to make this designation? Who benefits from their faith being affirmed, and what are the consequences if your approach to religion is deemed inauthentic? Thus, if a student challenges the Islamic *bone fides* of *The Conference of the Birds*, I remind students of the historical background of the poem described above, briefly mention the history of anti-Sufi critiques in the twentieth century, and then open a discussion about how we categorize religious practice as legitimate or illegitimate. If a student persists, that is another opportunity for reflection on identity, and how identity extends to the collective – to consider one's personal understanding of religion versus the lived experience of other members of one's faith who practice differently.

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