Teaching Sufism: Some Considerations

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After teaching an introductory course on Islam for over ten years I still am fascinated that most students are unaware of what Sufism is and how Sufism has influenced Islamic metaphysics, societies, cultures, histories, arts, sciences, and trade. In addition to asking myself "Why is there such a lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslim societies?" I have also often asked myself, "Why is there such a disconnect in the minds of students when it comes to Sufism and Islam?" For this current blog and the two that will follow in the Autumn months, I will share some thoughts about teaching Sufism and contemporary Sufism. As readers of the *Teaching Islam* blog can attest, teaching and writing are interconnected. Many of us write books and articles to use as tools for our classes. Just this past summer, I completed with my co-author, Dr. William Rory Dickson, an introductory textbook on Sufism entitled *Unveiling Sufism: From Manhattan to Mecca* (available next year through Equinox Publishers). I also am currently writing with my co-authors Dr. William Rory Dickson and Dr. Merin Shobhana Xavier a manuscript entitled *Contemporary Sufism: Piety, Politics, and Popular Culture* (available next year through Routledge Publishers). The structure, approach and content of these books have influenced my teaching on Sufism, and my experiences in the classroom have influenced my writing.

When teaching on Sufism, I find it helpful to "meet students where they are" with Islam, which means starting with the here and now. One way of doing this is to utilize a genealogical framework, in which the student begins to learn not with the historical past, but with the

contemporary present: with the diversity of living Sufism in North America today, and ways in which Sufis feel pressure from "both sides" – from non-Muslims and Muslims alike, albeit for different reasons. Taking this approach enables the teacher to explore the growing anti-Muslim, post-9/11 sentiment among North Americans, as well as the intensification of anti-Sufi sentiments among some Muslims (explaining, for example, why Muslim extremists are destroying Sufi shrines). Students then can also examine the different interpretive tendencies emerging among Sufi communities in North America, including universalist tendencies that understand Sufism as something not limited to Islam, as well as more traditionalist perspectives that assert Sufism's necessary connection to Islamic practices and laws. In addition, the students can learn Sufism's remarkable influence on North American art and culture, notably through the 13th century Sufi personality, Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose poetry has inspired a variety of different tributes and interpretive expressions, in visual art, yoga, social activism, dance, music, and even in the restaurant and café business.

By beginning with issues and themes found in the 21st and 20th centuries, students are then offered the complexities of Sufism as we collectively move deeper through time and space, journeying through a variety of historical, religious, political, and cultural contexts, further delving into the past, and closer to the "origin" of Sufism. This genealogical framework enables the student to understand the patterns of connection between contemporary manifestations of Sufism and past realities from, the bustling metropolis of 21st century Manhattan, to colonial Algeria, through medieval Delhi and Istanbul, back to Baghdad and ultimately Mecca – the birthplace of Islam and its mystical tradition.

In addition to using a genealogical framework, it is important to help students explore Sufism as a multidimensional phenomenon. Sufism has influenced Muslim philosophy and metaphysics, but also politics, art, and culture in each historical period. Utilizing particular Sufi figures, movements, places, artistic expressions, or philosophical views, the student develops a richly contextualized appreciation of Sufism. For example, one teaching exercise that I have used is to compare the tradition of wandering mendicants or dervishes of Islam to the leaders of the medieval imperial courts. In such a comparison, I like to share with students the symbolic significance of specific items from material culture. For example, I like to bring to class a very elaborate *kashkul* from Lahore, Pakistan, as well as miniature paintings of medieval dervishes from Turkey and Iran.

Another consideration when teaching on Sufism is to consciously integrate the contributions of women to Sufism, as well as the diversity of Sufism in different regions of the world. In order to avoid reducing the role of women to a subject for one class session, it is important to use women as examples in each historical era, drawing out numerous examples of Sufi women who have been engaged in politics, philosophy, arts, etc. Additionally, it is easy to use illustrations and case studies from the Middle East and South Asia, but it also is essential to help students explore Sufism in all regions of the world, especially Africa and Southeast Asia.

There are many different ways to enliven the teaching of Sufism and to make the subject speak to contemporary students who enter the classroom with diverse interests and preconceptions.

By engaging current concerns as well as pop culture manifestations of Sufism and then working backward in time toward the point of origin, it is possible to enable new ways of connecting with the subject matter. Such an approach also facilitates the introduction of perennial debates about Islam and Sufism in relation to current controversies, demonstrating continuity as well as change and diversity in Sufism throughout the centuries and opening student's minds to Islam's rich and varied cultural, intellectual, and spiritual heritage.

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