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Teaching Contemporary Sufism: Some Considerations

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Why and how has Sufism become such a contested topic in the 20th and 21st centuries, and what does “authentic” Sufism look like today? Why are historical Sufi shrines in Pakistan, Mali, and Iraq being destroyed by Muslims? Why do some Muslim governments ban Sufi literature and persecute Sufis, at a time when Sufism has become increasingly popular in the West? Is contemporary Sufism a singular phenomenon, or is it shaped by a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks? Exploring answers to these questions requires a great deal of contextual knowledge of history and religious thought as well as identity politics, and many students feel daunted by the complex terrain of contemporary Sufism. Given the temptation to settle for simple answers, students need encouragement to engage the dynamics surrounding Sufism, and to *critically* examine diverse Muslim as well as non-Muslim reactions to this deeply rooted and yet creatively adaptive current arising from within Islamic spirituality and mysticism.

When teaching on contemporary Sufism, I have started to explore three significant themes with my students:

- Sufism’s relationship to Islam and the development of anti-Sufi interpretive movements

Students need to understand the contestation over Islamic authenticity among pro- and anti-Sufi Muslims, which is arguably one of the most prominent conflicts currently playing out in Muslim societies. To this end, it is essential to help the student explore Sufism’s historical

shifts, by becoming familiar with unfinished debates over metaphysics, epistemology, and politics. One way to do this is to organize discussions about longstanding debates within Islamic thought, to promote familiarity with decisive historical moments for the formation of Sufi tradition as it evolved through engagement with theology and jurisprudence, in pursuit of answers to key questions: What is the nature of God? How can we gain knowledge of God? What is the nature and purpose of being human? Who inherits the founder's authority? How does one define being Muslim? While Sufis were often careful to avoid standing outside the circle of orthodoxy, their distinctive ways of answering these questions aroused debate, particularly in relation to such controversy-inducing Quranic concepts as *kashf* and *'ilm ladunni*, both of which relate to the attainment of unmediated spiritual knowledge and insight. By affording opportunities to examine contrasting orthodox views of Sufism or even constructing role plays or debates involving Sufi and anti-Sufi views, the teacher can create opportunities for penetrating insight into opposing interpretations grounded in divergent Islamic worldviews. By coming to understand classical debates on such topics, students will begin to grasp the backstory behind the many contradictory opinions about contemporary Sufism's relationship to Islamic tradition and communal life. Also, by unpacking the historical antecedents for current debates, students get to understand the rise of Islam's most sustained contemporary anti-Sufi movement, Wahhabism.

- Relationship Between Sufism and the West

When teaching about contemporary Sufism, it is also essential to explore the historical European encounter with Sufism during the colonial period, especially as European "Orientalist" scholars were attracted to Persian poetic traditions of Shamsuddin Hafez and Sadi of Shiraz, as well as to more elaborate Sufi ritualized practices such as those of the whirling dervishes. For this theme it is important for the student to understand that Sufi tradition was not engaged solely through textual means or through translation, but also through a felt affinity among some Western thinkers for Sufi ideals and worldviews, particularly as expressed through poetry. Encounters with Sufism's poetic spirit inspired European and American intellectuals and poets in new and fascinating ways. To illustrate, the teacher can explore with the students the lives and thought of two key literary Western figures: 1) the German author Johann Wolfgang Goethe (d. 1832), and 2) the American poet and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson (d. 1882). These two individuals' engagements with Sufi poetry and personalities are exemplary illustrations of how the Sufi tradition was encountered and understood through translation, also in ways that played a formative role in European spiritual and literary movements. Through examining such impacts of Sufism on early modern European intellectual culture, the student can gain insight into contemporary understandings of Sufism in the West, and especially its presence in contemporary popular culture as reflected in the phenomenon of "Rumimania."

- Gender Dynamics of Authority in Sufi Communities

When teaching about contemporary Sufism, it also is very useful to explore the growing prominence of women in authoritative roles. In doing so it is important to help the student

understand the “hidden” history of Sufism, in which Sufi female personalities were influential not only in current times but also in the development of the various aspects of the Sufi tradition, from developing its principles and practices to transmitting knowledge, and receiving recognition as saints, spiritual teachers, and authorities. Although the present era has offered additional opportunities for women to take on roles that were once reserved primarily for men, the contemporary period also shows great continuity with a history that includes women saints, teachers, and practitioners of Sufism. In North America, women carry forward this tradition by continuing to play important roles in Sufism’s development and in some cases even extending their roles beyond traditional boundaries.

In a day and age of Islamophobia and clichéd thinking about Islam (sometimes promulgated by Muslim as well as by non-Muslim thinkers) teaching about contemporary Sufism can help to complexify and diversify students’ imaginations of Islam, particularly when such teaching actively seeks to make connections between past and present. By moving beyond more static debates about whether Sufism *is* or *is not* the heart of orthodox Islam (and either *is* or *is not* “authentic” in any given contemporary expression), teachers can show how Sufism has for centuries been central to debates over what is essential in Islam, and indeed over what Islam *is*. In the process, students can attain to a much richer and more dynamic understanding of Islamic tradition as well as of the encounter of Islamic and the Western polities and cultures.

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