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Exposing students to the academic study of Islam for the first time is simultaneously thrilling and daunting. Over the years my classes have included both Muslim and non-Muslim students. In each case the challenge is different. Most of my non-Muslim students have come to learn about an “alien” religion with which they have little actual familiarity. For these students the initial task is to get them to look beyond the variety of stereotypes that they may hold about Islam, especially in the post-9/11 context. Among the most common of these stereotypes is the notion that Islam is a relatively univocal tradition; a simple and legalistic monotheism that has remained relatively unchanged until confronted by the rise of modernity and the subsequent rise of European hegemony.

Muslim students come to the academic study of Islam with greater familiarity, however their knowledge is often rooted in particular cultural and theological understandings, making it difficult to take seriously the religiosity of Muslims who practice differently. With various forms of salafi Islam gaining currency in college and university environments, my pedagogy has often involved getting my Sunni Muslim students to accept the necessity of grappling with Shi’i and Sufi Islam as legitimate modes of Muslim piety. A central goal of my teaching is to get both Muslim and non-Muslim students to recognize the sheer fact of an inherent and vibrant pluralism of the Islamic tradition.

By pluralism I refer not only to the remarkable linguistic and cultural pluralism of the Muslim

world, but also its spiritual and theological diversity evident in numerous manifestations and expressions of piety — from Shariah-minded ritual practice, to Sufi dhikr and pilgrimage, to Shi'i commemorations of martyrdom. An appreciation of that diversity is central to any complete understanding of Islam and its history. Thus I begin my discussion of Islam not with religious law and ritual practice, but instead with essential beliefs shared by all Muslims.

It is not surprising that I would take this approach. As an undergraduate, I took a course on South Asian religions in which our discussion of Islam focused on the Sufi tradition. I remember vividly images of the *urs* celebrations at the tomb of Muinuddin Chishti, which led to my lifelong fascination with Sufi pilgrimage and “popular” Islam. I also took courses on Islam that, among other things, introduced me to the little-known world of the Ismaili Muslim tradition. At graduate school, I studied the complexities of Twelver Shi'ism and spent the following years doing extended periods of research in Pakistan and Uzbekistan studying aspects of the Sufi and Shi'i traditions. For the last ten years I have been involved in the study of the Turkish Alevi tradition.

I present this intellectual autobiography because I feel it has been essential to my understanding of Islam as a pluralistic tradition. From the start, I never learned the Sunni legal tradition as the norm — the “straight path” to which one can compare the “less orthodox” Sufi and Shi'i traditions. For me, Shariah-minded Sunni Islam is simply one very important manifestation of Islamic piety among many. Thus I want to instill in my students the essential understanding that the various Sufi and Shi'i movements within Islam do not see themselves as “heterodox” or peripheral. Their adherents view them as valid responses to the spiritual challenge presented by the Qur'an and the Prophet.

On the first day of my classes, I begin by comparing Islam to a tree and noting that every tree has both roots and branches. The branches are theology and law which depend for their existence upon the roots. These latter are the *usul al-din*, the roots of religion. The three roots shared by Sunni and Shi'a alike are:

*auhid*

(Belief in the Unity of God),

*Nubuwwat*

(Belief in Prophets) and

*Qiyamat*

(Belief in the Day of Judgment). I use the

*usul al-din*

as the organizing principle of all of my introductory discussions on Islam, because the varieties of Islamic belief and practice are rooted in differing interpretations of these concepts.

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*Tauhid* is the central tenet of Islam. For all Muslims “there is no god, but God.” However, interpretations of *tauhid* run the gamut from the strict monotheism associated with Ibn Taimiyyah, who argues for an utter distinction between the Creator and creation, to the mystical vision of *tauhid* associated with Hallaj and Ibn al-Arabi that sees a unity of being ( *wahdat al-wujud*) between God and the universe.

*Nubuwwat* means belief in prophets, especially the Prophet Muhammad to whom the Qur’an was revealed. Some Muslims, particularly those associated with the salafi and wahabi traditions, emphasize the utter distinction between God and the Prophet. They see his primary role as a messenger and deliverer of the Qur’an. More mystical traditions, however, see Muhammad as the manifestation of a primordial light ( *nur*) that is the origin of all creation and emphasize the intense love of God for the Prophet, who is defined as *Habibullah* (the beloved of God) who should be loved as evidence of one’s love for God. This has always been an essential aspect of so-called “popular Islam.” It is most fully expressed in the traditions of Shi’ism and Sufism where devotion to the Prophet is extended to those who are his legitimate descendants. Thus, for Sufis and Shi’i Muslims respectively, devotion to the pirs and imams becomes an essential aspect of Muslim piety.

Finally, *Qiyamat* refers to the Day of Judgment and the corollary belief that human beings are morally responsible beings who will be held accountable for their actions before God. For some Muslims the belief in the *Qiyamat* demands a literal understanding of the descriptions of Paradise and Hell that one finds in the Qur’an. For others these descriptions are symbolic of the bliss of eternal proximity to and the agony of eternal separation from God. More mystically the Alevi tradition sees heaven and hell as eternally present among us in the here and now.

The point I try to make to my students is that the myriad expressions of Islamic piety — from the recitation of the Qur’an to the practice of the five pillars of Islam, to recognizing and giving allegiance to the living Imam of the Age, to participation in Sufi pilgrimage and *dhikr* — should be seen as responses to these essential but multivocal beliefs. Our challenge in the academic study of Islam is not to decide which of these responses are the correct ones, but rather to understand the variety of those responses and the arguments made for them by their practitioners.

Of course my students have often asked, “Which is the real Islam?” Before I became a Muslim myself, I responded by asking, “Do you really want a non-Muslim white guy deciding which

Islam is the 'real' Islam intended by God and the Prophet Muhammad? After all, Muslims of good faith have argued about this for nearly 1,400 years. Should I presume to settle those arguments? Our task is to look at the variety of answers given by Muslims over time."

As a Muslim, I still give a similar answer. I explain that I, of course, have my own personal beliefs about the real meaning of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet, which I am happy to share with my students, but my goal in the class was not to affirm which version of Islam is the "real Islam." Instead, I seek to fairly represent the diversity of Islamic traditions so that a salafi Muslim would see his or her tradition respectfully and accurately presented, as would an usuli Shi'a, a Nizari Ismaili, a Naqshbandi or Chishti murid, an Alevi, a Nusayri, or a secular Muslim. The answer to the "truth question," which for believers is existentially much more important, simply cannot be answered in the classroom; in the end the truth question is a religious and not an academic question. Most of my students have accepted that answer.