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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Using a Cosmological Map as a Teaching Tool

Meena Sharify-Funk, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

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One of my previous blog posts mentioned the significance of storytelling and how I love sharing stories of my own travel to help students imagine the world of the classroom subject and, hopefully, to inspire students to travel and experience this world for themselves. As most teachers can testify, some of the greatest moments of being a teacher involve learning how knowledge that was conveyed within the classroom leads students to new learning experiences beyond the classroom. For example, it is quite wonderful when one receives word from a former student who decided to travel to places that were shared in the classroom setting – places like Fez, Cairo, or Lahore. Just this summer a former student, originally from Serbia, sent a message that he had visited Shiraz, Iran, and mentioned how he remembered my lecture on this beloved city.

As teachers, we all have favorite lectures and one of mine is on Shiraz. In it, I help the student to explore how a city can become not only an intellectual center and intercultural capital for convening scholars from many disciplines and identities, but also a home to “immortal” poets and saints who became known as “friends of God.” In this blog post and my next, I want to describe why it is so important to teach about such cities, which were renowned for their “Houses of Knowledge,” eternal gardens, and magnificent shrines.

I begin my lectures on these cities by mentioning how when a student leaves home he or she starts to reflect more about his or her parents and home. It is often only when we leave our

home that we become more curious about who we are, where we came from, and how our own family fits into the larger world. I then share my own story of how at their age (entering into university) I started to learn more about my father's heritage and eventually I took a trip to Iran with my father that would change my life.

Why? Shortly after the trip, my uncle, himself a professor of entomology, mailed me a package containing a most intriguing book, written entirely in Persian by a great-great-great grandfather during the 1800s. Folded into the center of the book was a remarkable Islamic cosmological map drafted by yet another grandfather from six generations back. As I share this map with my students, I then tell my students that for the last 20 years I have been trying to decipher the metaphysical and symbolic content of this spiritual map, and to gain a firmer grasp of how this content synthesized centuries of Sufi Muslim thought about two arcs of the soul's journey through a multi-layered cosmos – an arc of emanation, and an arc of return.

In sharing the physical map I am able to explain a variety of aspects of living in a traditional Islamic city like Shiraz. For instance, the map represents a pre-modern understanding of the world and the cosmos where everything is a symbol and there are multi-layered meanings to reality itself. This helps me explain how many Muslim theologians and philosophers understood metaphysics in terms of different levels of reality which might be deciphered through such diverse means as letter mysticism, numerology, astrology, and contemplation of passages from sacred texts as well as inspired poetry. I mention how the map itself was intended to provide a symbolic representation of the soul's journey through unseen as well as visible dimensions of the cosmos. Having been produced by a respected religious leader in Shiraz generations ago, the map speaks not just to the ideas of the author but also to the larger spiritual and cultural milieu in which he lived. It conveys how Shiraz was a center for learning not only metaphysics but also physics and astronomical observation. I share with my students how the map's shape is in the form of an astrolabe, a scientific as well as navigational instrument for measuring the altitudes of celestial bodies. I then show them an astrolabe that I found in Shiraz which is very similar in design to the map. With the astrolabe, I am able to explain a variety of amazing scientific contributions, inventions, and innovations that were made by Muslim astronomers, such as Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi (d. 986) and Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi (d. 1311).

I also point out that the map has poetic verses inscribed on it in writing that reflects the artistic forms of calligraphy. Once again, I have the opportunity to offer my students a window into a traditional world of Islamic culture, within which the great poets of a city or region would play a major role in defining unique aspects of that place's heritage and identity. I note that for Shiraz the preeminent poets were Hafez and Sadi, whereas other cities had their own patron saints and poets. I mention how the shrines of these two poets remain among the most celebrated spaces in the city to this very day, establishing a link between past and present.

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