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Reflecting on Identity with Mystical Texts: Part One

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship
October 18, 2023
Tags: critical thinking | teaching | pedagogy | Sufism | self-reflection | Changing Scholarship | mysticism

In a first-year seminar guided by the question "Who am I?" my students are often a little shocked that their first reading suggests that they annihilate their sense of self. Though the inner lives of a medieval mystic and a contemporary student at an American university may seem worlds apart, I have found that mystical texts offer a profound space for students to critically reflect on their identity, position in the world, and relationship to others – including the divine. With research expertise in medieval Islamic mysticism, it is perhaps unsurprising that I gravitate towards mystical texts. Other scholars of mysticism will likely concur that the mystical offers a fruitful avenue for reflection on the question of identity; as William B. Parsons notes in his introduction to the edited volume *Teaching Mysticism*, the study of mysticism is "rich and complex, mysterious and compelling, dense and troubling but, above all, of immense cultural relevance" (2011, 5). However, it has been unexpected and gratifying to see *The Conference of the Birds* – a medieval Sufi poem – become a popular text among my colleagues who teach Villanova University's interdisciplinary humanities first-year seminar, Augustine and Culture (ACS). The fact that only a handful of my colleagues are fellow scholars of religion, and none are experts in Islam or mysticism attests to the relevance of mystical texts for exploring questions of identity. Scholars of religion who do not specialize in mysticism may ask: What is it about the mystical that allows our students to reflect so deeply on their selves?

I suggest four primary reasons why mystical texts are helpful for exploring the self.

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- First, the notion that the self must be overcome or even annihilated (to use the technical term from Islamic mysticism) is a fascinating way to ask "What is the self?" What is central to identity and what is peripheral?
- Second, mystical worldviews offer some of the most expansive views of human cognition, allowing students to consider the constraints they put on themselves and how to remove unhealthy barriers.
- Third, with some theories of mysticism positing a universal human experience, students can reflect on the possibility (or lack thereof) of transcending boundaries of gender, sexuality, religion, culture, and so forth.
- Fourth, with many faculty members lamenting that students are becoming increasingly prone to black-and-white thinking or polarized factions, the mystical helps students to become more comfortable with paradox and uncertainty. Moreover, it allows them to consider how uncertainty might be conducive to critical thinking and deeper self-reflection.

The following series of blog posts [Part 2: available 12/6/23] provide an overview of how the mystical invites profound reflection on identity. Although I will focus on the medieval Persian Sufi epic *The Conference of the Birds*, I believe that numerous other mystical texts from across religious traditions can invite similar insights on the self. In this post, I give a summary of *The Conference of the Birds* and the themes that are particularly suited to examining questions of identity. The next post provides practical tips for introducing key concepts of mysticism in order to help students understand the relevance of mysticism in a world that is preoccupied with material success, relationships, and tangible sources of happiness (in other words, a world that is often directly hostile to the aims of mystics). The final post contains assignment ideas and a concluding reflection. While these tips are mostly intended for scholars new to mystical texts, they may be of use to specialists looking to revise their teaching techniques or introduce the mystical in general survey courses.

"My Self Frustrates Me": An Overview of *The Conference of the Birds* and the Value of Mysticism for Self-Reflection

Written by Farīd al-Dīn ʻAṭṭār (d. 1221 CE), *The Conference of the Birds* (Pr. *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*) is an allegorical poem that imagines the Sufi mystical path as a group of birds and their perilous journey to find their king – the mythical Simorgh. The poem richly describes several species of birds and the individual flaws that prevent them from achieving spiritual excellence, as well as the tireless work of their guide – represented by a hoopoe – to help them understand that their worldly concerns are insufficient to achieving true happiness and convince them to pursue the divine instead. The poem includes short, allegorical avian excuses and the hoopoe's responses, along with rich descriptions of the path itself (represented by seven arduous valleys), and a final discussion of divine union. Though the poem is specifically concerned with the Sufi path, teachers may find use for the poem in any class concerned with identity and self-reflection.

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Mystical writings present students with a provocative challenge to what many of them consider central to their identities. *The Conference of the Birds* suggests the things that people usually focus on – family, love, career, and so forth – are ultimately meaningless. Thus, it provides an excellent way for students to reflect on what is fundamental to their identities and what is peripheral. Furthermore, it prompts them to examine if they should leave the peripheral and temporal behind in pursuit of the eternal, or if such a path is too extreme. At Villanova, each student begins their first year by writing an essay responding to the question "what is a life well lived?" Many write about the importance of family, friends, and material comfort. This provides an outstanding foil for introducing the radical rejection of these ideas as presented in *The Conference of the Birds*. Though I have yet to encounter a student who takes up the mystical path after reading the poem, I have taught hundreds of students who can better articulate why having a family is essential to their identity after reading a text that encourages them to leave behind all worldly and temporary connections.

In keeping with the theme of profoundly challenging students' assumptions, Sufism advocates for a radical annihilation of the self to reach unity with God. The notion that one's identity is essentially meaningless in the face of ultimate reality is daunting, yet my students are frequently intrigued by this. When discussing the idea of annihilation of self, some students react with fear, others with comfort. Those who are fearful note that it reminds them of their own mortality, but that it also brings up more immediate concerns: why bother with college if nothing but God matters? Conversely, those who are comforted by it say that being reminded of their own cosmic insignificance makes them feel freer. After all, who cares about a B on a test if nothing but God matters? Either reaction brings out reflection on identity and what is considered essential to the self.

While the concept of annihilation of self can be intimidating, I remind students that the mystical is also one of the most open views of human capacity. I first encountered this approach to mysticism when taking a graduate seminar on contemplative theology with Wendy Farley. She noted that contemplatives hold some of the most expansive views of the mind and its potential, which is one of the most self-affirming views of the mystical I have ever heard. Thus, while 'Aṭṭār frequently uses negative language about the self, I encourage students to consider just how bold a claim he is making: a person can unite with God. Or more specifically, given the imagery of the polished mirror at the end of the poem, a person can reveal that which is divine within themselves ('Aṭṭār 1984, 235). Considering this view of humanity and its potential brings out a fascinating counterpoint to the negative view of the self-described above. This encourages students to consider readings of the text that are not readily apparent or intuitive. Moreover, the realization that "losing the self" means becoming or revealing the divine within oneself can empower students to think more positively about themselves and their abilities.

When one considers the theory of mysticism alongside the text, the expansiveness of the mystical worldview extends beyond individuals to the possibility of a collective, universal human experience. Neoperennialist scholars of mysticism such as Robert Forman suggest that mystical experience is completely unmediated by language, culture, and religion, and thus

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represents a shared core of humanity (1999). While this position is hardly uncontroversial (I have argued against it myself), I find that students are deeply intrigued by the possibility of a shared core of human experience. Given that Forman and others argue that the mystical represents a unique opportunity to access this singular human experience, this theory demonstrates the relevance of mysticism particularly well. While many students remain skeptical of the possibility of universal experience, this conversation is a pathway to consider how one might overcome social, religious, ethnic, linguistic, gendered, and other constraints. It also invites reflection on whether or not these so-called constraints or social factors – say, gender – is an essential aspect of identity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the mystical provides space to become more comfortable with paradox, ineffability, and uncertainty. In a recent *New York Times* op-ed, Jonathan Malesic argued that the biggest predictor of college success was intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas. He noted well-intentioned undergraduates who seemed terrified of taking difficult subjects for fear of not already knowing the subject matter of the class, often seeing knowledge in simple "right/wrong" terms (2023). I have noticed this tendency more and more with my own students. My undergraduates are remarkably bright, but are often reticent if they do not feel certain of the answer. I have observed a marked improvement in students' intellectual confidence and overall academic development in courses when I begin with a mystical text. I believe this is because they immediately encounter an author using paradoxical language intentionally. The revelation (explored in the next blog post *available 12/6/23*) that the inability to express oneself rationally does not mean that one is stupid, inarticulate, or talking about something unimportant is an essential step to developing the intellectual openness and confidence to succeed.

Though many mystical texts invite reflection on the above questions of identity, this series of blogs will focus on *The Conference of the Birds* in the hopes that other faculty will feel confident to add it to their syllabi. It works especially well in a first-year seminar, an introduction to Islam course, a general mysticism survey, or classes on literature and religion. Though it is a profound text that deserves close attention and expertise, I find that nonexperts can become comfortable teaching it with the practical tips I outline below. In my own department, I have led faculty development workshops to help scholars from across humanities disciplines prepare to teach the text and am happy to share that all have reported back that it was a student favorite (and a favorite to teach). The text is lengthy, but can easily be excerpted to be taught in approximately two weeks of class time. I typically assign the introduction to the poem (which allows me to outline the Sufi path, ideas of ineffability, and loss of self), the bird's excuses (which provides an opportunity for student self-reflection about what holds them back from pursuing difficult tasks), the sections of the poem in which 'Aṭṭār describes the seven "valleys" of the journey (which invites contemplation of how one responds to difficult circumstances, whether or not trials are necessary, and how gradual loss of identity feels emotionally), and the final section of the poem (which prompts conversation on the notions of loss of self-identity, divine union, and the possibility of a universal experience). Depending on the nature of the class, one also could focus on a range of other themes and elements of the text including: the format of the allegorical stories, the form of the poetry itself, and nature

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Notes & Bibliography

‘Aṭṭār, Farīd al-Dīn, Dick Davis, and Afkham Darbandi. *The Conference of the Birds*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984

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