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Teaching Islamic Theology through Black Lives

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In a time when it is of paramount importance to assert and witness that black lives matter, how do we go about preparing our Islam courses that all too often afford little to no time at all for the societal crises that prevail all around us? This, at least, is a question that weighs heavily on my mind at the beginning of every semester. While I continue to wrestle with this question (and it is very much an ongoing project) I wanted to share one course where I feel I have found some success in striking a semi-satisfying balance. The course in question is Islamic theology, which is a course that at first glance might not seem to lend itself to addressing contemporary questions of race and justice.

Islamic Theology has become a staple course in my teaching repertoire. The chance to explore the theological investments and concerns of a wide and diverse global faith community draws in students regularly, and I find the course to be one of my more fulfilling teaching endeavors. What I look forward to in offering the course, however, is not the long slog through thorny historical debates or unpacking the subtle, complex, and sometimes-convoluted arguments of medieval scholastics. Rather, what makes the course so worthwhile is the opportunity to discuss with students over the course of a semester how black lives matter within the matrices

of Islamic thought and belief. I admit that this is not a straightforward conversation to initiate and then carefully frame, but the unique book that helps to make this possible is Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2012). This book is not an addendum to the course or a tangential excursion. It constitutes the central text for our semester-long engagement with Islamic theology.

It is easy to overlook Sherman Jackson's book as a potential textbook for the subject at hand. Other survey monographs and edited volumes for the field of Islamic theology exist, but these works tend to stop short of the modern era and rarely take the time to emphasize the relevance of theology for Muslim communities today. In these two respects, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* differs. As the title suggests, its main objective is not to provide a conventional account or general overview of the Islamic theological tradition (though it does this in part). The objective is more pointed. Jackson's book is squarely aimed at thinking through the question of theodicy – the problem of evil – as it relates to the concrete, historical experience of black suffering. The critical question at the heart of the book might be phrased as follows: How can God, who is supposedly omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, allow the enslavement, degradation, and dehumanization of a people to transpire for generation after generation on the crude basis of the color of their skin? How would, or rather *should*, classical Muslim theological perspectives respond to this challenge?

Through these two thought-provoking questions, the readers of the book, the students in my course, are immediately made aware of several key points. First, the Muslims involved in the Islamic theological discourse are not simply Arabic and Persian-speaking intellectuals of a bygone medieval past. Rather, the Muslim community to which the theological tradition attends is incredibly diverse, widespread, and thriving in the here and now. The lives and voices of black Muslims, in particular, are part of that tradition. A course on Islamic theology, then, ought to afford this diverse community space to speak and to be heard. Second, the reach of Islamic theology is not confined to the experiences of Muslims living in Muslim-majority societies. Rather, Muslims have also carved out lives for themselves here across the Atlantic, and their engagements with theology have something to say (many things in fact) about the brutal and unjust experience that Blackamericans have been subjected to over the past few centuries. Finally, the book also generates a new vision of how to understand Muslims and Islamic theology. Expected names like Aḥmad b. Hanbal, al-Ash'arī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyya are placed in conversation with perhaps unexpected ones, like William R. Jones, Paul Gilroy, and Kwame Gyekye. If anything, it should be clear that Islamic theology is not an enterprise developing in religious isolation. It is one voice, an important voice, in a wider world of righteous concern.

There is, of course, plenty of knowledge content in the book for students to work through as well. Following a description of the theodicy problem in question and then a concise historical summary of early Islamic theological developments, Jackson explores four major schools of theology in detail across the remaining four chapters. His treatments are intricate and systematic and as a class, we will spend weeks working through the religious worldviews of the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites, Māturīdites, and Ḥanbalī Traditionalists. Jackson also concludes each

account with a continuation of his initial thought experiment, namely how might each of these schools answer the question posed by William R. Jones' provocative book *Is God a White Racist?* – the same critical question that I identified and rephrased above.

Yet, as effective as *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* is for my Islamic Theology course, it cannot do everything. There are certain lacunae to address and contexts to explain further. One of the most effective complementary pieces I've used to this latter end is the first chapter of James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. The Cone piece not only brings black liberation theology from the Christian tradition more explicitly into relief for my students (it is after all the backdrop to Jones' theodicy challenge), it also brings an important element of comparative theology into our classroom conversations. It prompts students to imagine how might other faith traditions be answering the same pressing question. I am also conscious that Jackson's book leaves out a good deal as well with respect to the Islamic theological tradition. Sufism and Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*), for example, are profoundly muted in the book, and I work to bring one or both of these perspectives into the orbit of the course as well through a number of readings and voices.

I would like to note before I end that the centrality of Sherman Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* for my course is typically jarring for my students. This discomfort, however, I deem a good and necessary step. The intellectual shift that the book precipitates is precisely what transforms what might otherwise have been a standard historical survey of Islamic doctrine into a lively engagement with the ideas and beliefs that Muslims have repeatedly turned to in the face of skepticism, adversity, and existential crisis. Instead of keeping the recurring news stories related to race in America at arms-length, Jackson's book allows me to foreground these current events in the classroom. In effect, they become an integral part of our daily conversations by providing concrete examples of the collective experiences that the term "black suffering" so poignantly signifies and serves to emphasize why the enterprise of Islamic theology still matters immensely for so many today.

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