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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching Islam through Storytelling

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Blog Series: Teaching Islam

March 01, 2017

Tags: engaged teaching | student diversity | storytelling

I was scheduled to write a blog post on teaching about controversial issues and how they are shaping contemporary Muslim identities in North America. Guessing, however, that many readers may be fatigued from the barrage of unfavorable events – from the U.S. travel ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries to a horrible attack on a mosque in Quebec – I have decided to dedicate this particular blog to one of my favorite pedagogical tools for inspiring hope as well as a lasting sense of personal connection to the subject matter: the telling of a story.

Storytelling is one of the oldest techniques that human beings have used to teach one another. From pre-Islamic times to the present day, all Muslim societies have been shaped by orality in the form of tales, fables, myths, legends, and narratives. As I have emphasized to my students, there are many purposes for storytelling: for spiritual and moral guidance; for creating a sense of the supernatural, the metaphysical, and the existential; for inspiring learning, wonder, and adventure; for critiquing self and society; and for reinforcing historical narratives, in ways that can create positive social identity as well as stereotypes, prejudices, and even a basis for ongoing conflict. Whether I am teaching an introductory course on Islam or a graduate course on Sufi expressions of Islam, some of my greatest moments in class are when I share with students a story of my living experience of traveling to particular places in the Muslim world.

For this blog I would like to share a story from a visit to Egypt more than a decade ago, as a window into diverse aspects of Arab and Middle Eastern culture (I also sometimes share this story when lecturing on traditional Islamic cities). While my particular story will differ from the stories other instructors will use in their own teaching, I hope that the manner in which I communicate different realities and experiences will prompt others to harvest their own distinctive experiences, and consider which aspects of those experiences might be richest in content for students – particularly those whose ideas about Muslim-majority and Middle Eastern societies are abstract and largely gleaned from news and popular culture.

In 2003, I had the honor of planning and coordinating a conference at the Library of Alexandria in Egypt. After the conference was over I lingered in Egypt for a number of days, and on my last day I wanted to go shopping for books on Sufism in Cairo. (I would share with my students that Cairo and Damascus have long been two of the greatest cities in the Middle East for finding and buying books on Sufism.) A list of books in hand, my husband and I went from one bookstore to another and then another until we finally encountered, at the very back of one store, a beautiful elderly man who wrote and then recited the following sentence on a piece of paper: “You must find Abdul Rahman at 5:00 pm in Azbakeya.” Inspired by this new lead, we set out to find Azbakeya but no one knew where it was. Finally, after much searching, we found it – an area in Cairo where there were booksellers of every kind, clustered in row upon row of small metal shacks. Somewhat daunted about where to start, we began to ask where we might find Abdul Rahman. As so often happens in the Middle East, many people were willing to stop, listen, and try to help, leading us from one person to the next but still no Abdul Rahman. Eventually, though, we did find Abdul Rahman and promptly showed him the list. How long, he asked, would we be in Cairo? “We leave tonight,” we informed him. Hearing this, he physically closed his shack for the day and said, “Follow me.” Surprised by this turn of events and uncertain about exactly where we were going, my husband and I then started to follow Abdul Rahman through the busy streets of Cairo, swerving this way and that. The sunset prayer had just begun and people were bustling about – some going home, some praying on the street, and others on their way to whatever events they had planned for the evening. Abdul Rahman then did a strange thing. He climbed into the front passenger seat of a taxi cab and beckoned us to get into the back of it. Still unsure of our destination, we complied with his request and felt good about this new, unforeseen but promising development. As a professor once told us, “Surrender to the grace of the moment.”

As we made our way down paved but dusty streets, we started to realize that our cab was approaching “the City of the Dead” (I would share with my students how this is an area known to be both one of the largest cemeteries in the Middle East and also a place where the poorest of Cairo’s poor find spaces to live.) Abdul Rahman was taking us to his home. The cab dropped us off in front of a modest mausoleum building, and Abdul Rahman yelled up to the second floor where his beautiful daughter, perhaps 8 or 9 years old, was holding a baby. She peeked out, ran down to the front gate, opened it, and handed the baby to her father. We then entered the building and followed Abdul Rahman to his living quarters, where there were books on all four walls, and books in boxes as well as on top of boxes and tables. We could not imagine fitting more books into one space. Abdul Rahman then handed the baby to my husband before

proceeding to search his stacks, and I thought to myself, "This is the first time I have seen my husband hold a baby and it was in the City of the Dead!" Knowing his collection well, Abdul Rahman moved efficiently from one stack to another and brought forth a stack of books on Sufism. Some, he pointed out, were hundreds of years old – for instance, an early edition of Ibn al-'Arabi's *Futuh al-Makkiyyah*.

Even though we did not want to bargain – no easy task for us in any event, made somewhat more awkward by the circumstances – we then had to haggle for the books. (I would share with my students the social significance of haggling and the art to a good haggler!) Soon, after a few purchases and some small talk about baby names (Abdul Rahman cited a *hadith* of the Prophet to explain his own preference for boys' names starting with Abdul [meaning *servant* of a particular divine quality] and etymological variations on Muhammad [which translates literally as "praising and praiseworthy"]), it was time for us to leave. We had to get back to our hotel, check out, and then leave for the airport to catch our flight. Abdul Rahman went outside and hailed a taxi for us in the City of the Dead.

While conversing with our young cab driver, we discovered that he was a Nubian, with roots in Egypt's culturally distinctive south. Upon hearing that we had come from the United States, he smiled and, with a thumbs-up signal, articulated a single word with much drama: "Schwarzenegger!" We immediately grasped his meaning, though this was our first news of the matter: Arnold Schwarzenegger had won the election, becoming governor of California. Unable to resonate with his obvious excitement, we felt what might be described as the beginning stage of reverse culture shock. My husband and I looked at each other, and could read the same meaning in each others' faces: "We are going back to *that*." In an attempt to change the subject, we tried to steer the conversation to Egypt and Egyptians – so much hospitality, and so many amazing things to see. Our driver was happy to hear of our positive experience, and appeared to enjoy the exchange. Then about five minutes before arriving at the hotel our driver pulled over to the side of the road, and turned to us with a hand signal that every visitor to the country must learn within the first day or two: "Please wait just a minute." He then hopped out of the car and left us in it! Once again we consulted intuition but things felt good and we "surrendered to the grace of the moment." A few minutes later, our driver popped out of a small roadside shop, slid into the driver's seat, and turned to present us with a single rose in each hand. He looked at us with light in his eyes and said, "Welcome to Egypt!"

Many of my students over the years have told me that this is one of the stories they remember. Like other stories, it beckons them to encounter the Muslim world with openness, wonder and awe rather than fear, perplexity, or prejudice. With this story, I invite my students to enjoy the process of entering into the same sense of discovery experienced by a traveler abroad on some new journey, never quite knowing what to do or what to expect, but open to common humanity, curious about cultural nuance, and eager for the inevitable experience of surprise.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/03/teaching-islam-through-storytelling/>