

Global Discourses and Teaching: Islam in World History

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Abstract

Islam is often treated as an historical monolith associated with Byzantium, the Iberian Peninsula, or as a reaction to the West. Rarely do we see it treated as a topic on its own; most texts and lessons show it as a reaction. Often it is covered simply as a type of military experience that pops up in Spain, the Mediterranean, or India. A more comprehensive and diverse coverage of Islam in World History, including that which is seen in Mughal India or after the influence of Sufism, could help us develop a stronger narrative, one that is also cognizant of the voice of the historical "other" in world history. In this research, I will address the following issues:

- A. Non-Arab interpretations of Islam (Sufism)*
- B. The empires of South Asia (the Mughals)*
- C. The merits of Islam as a significant section of the human experience, giving voice to the historical other*

1. Introduction

Islam is often treated as an historical monolith commonly associated with Byzantium and the Iberian Peninsula, or described as a reaction to the West. Rarely in the coverage of Islam do we see it treated as a topic on its own; most texts and lessons describe it as reactionary. Often it is covered simply as a type of military experience appearing in Spain, the Mediterranean, or India. A fuller coverage in World History classrooms that shows the diversity of Islam, such as can be seen in Mughal India or as a result of the influence of Sufism, could help us develop a stronger narrative that is also cognizant of the voice of the historical "other" in world history.

I will address these issues by offering potential themes that could be covered while teaching students about Islam, including:

- A. Non-Arab interpretations of Islam such as Sufism.
- B. The empires of South Asia, such as the Mughals, to be presented as a counterweight to an Arabized version of Islam.
- C. The merits of Islam and its place as a significant portion of the human experience, giving voice to the historical other

These themes can be used to develop an innovative approach to teaching students about Islam and its role in world history. As instructors, we often have very difficult schedules and departmental requirements that factor into what we can or cannot teach in any given semester. However, time requirements do not excuse us from providing our students with innovative interpretations of those we study in history. The way we design a course and the execution of our lessons should serve to provide our students with a first class education. The implications of this responsibility can be global in scope; our teaching should help to answer vital questions of agency when speaking of the historical "other." It is our duty to help our students understand the importance of the narratives of the various societies and peoples that appear throughout history, and to help our students assume the role of global citizens.

Furthermore, to develop a fuller dialogue on the diverse narrative of Islam we must understand the nomenclature needed to create a strong narrative. I have provided a short glossary guide to help us in identifying the different types of schools, philosophies, and social systems students might encounter in a study of Islam in a World History classroom.

Table 1. Glossary/Guide

Comparison of Different Schools of Thought				
Name	Geography	Practice	Empire	Notes
<i>Sunni Hanafi</i>	Indian Sub-Continent, SW Asia, SE Asia, W Africa, E Africa, Turkey, Caucas, Syria, Iraq, & Sub-Saharan (African Transition Zone)	The oldest school The most liberal school Majority of Sunnis	Ottomans Abbasids Mughals Delhi Sultanate	Founded by 9th century Persian scholar Abu Hanifa who was a student of Jafar As-Sadiq, a famous Shia Scholar
Shias	Modern Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, & Azerbaijan	The first of the orthodox branches (before Hanafi-Sunnis) The 12 Imams (Hereditary/Ali) majority Belief in the Ayatollah (Pope-like figure)	Safavids	The region was once Sunni-Hanafi before the Safavids arrived
Wahhabi/Salafis	Saudi Arabia & Gulf Region	Strict militant interpretation of Islam In a struggle with the West (Ideologically not of the orthodoxy)	Ibn Saud Ibn Wahabb	Actively engaged in a struggle against the West Opened madrasas throughout developing world to reinterpret Islam Intolerance towards Shias, moderate Sunnis, and Sufis
Sufism	Throughout Asia, Africa (E/W & Sub-Saharan), Middle East, & Caucas Region	Very liberal interpretation of Islam emphasizing the love of the prophet Muhammad A belief in the universal brotherhood of all people	Ottomans Mughals	Sufis can be both Shia and Sunni Sufi saints traveling with traders in East Africa and India, for example, spread the religion beyond the Hejaz Absorbs the culture and traditions of the locals, fusing it with the monotheism of Islam

2. Non-Arab Interpretations: Sufism

Sufism is a dynamic interpretation of Islam; many see it as a more universal understanding of Islam that emphasizes tenets originating in the idea of the

ultimate love of the Prophet. This universal love symbolizes our common humanity and rejects the vanities of the materialistic world. Sufism stresses the importance of the concept of Sadaq-e-Rasul, a notion that is expressed by many of the famous Sunni

Hanafis, including major Sufi poets such as Rumi, Saadi, and Qayyam. Sadaq-e-Rasul is a concept that emphasizes Sadaqa, which means charity in Arabic, and is one of the five major pillars of Islam that the Prophet espoused, likely because of his background as an orphan in Mecca [9]. The Sufi emphasize the importance of the human experience, in contrast to the orthodoxy espoused by the Shia and Sunni.

This more liberal interpretation of Islam is vital to our understanding of Islam, because historically Sufism has been a major vehicle for cultural exchange and the spread of Islam. There were no armies or horses necessary to bring Sufism into the Indo-Malay region. Yet this interpretation of Islam spread rapidly in the Indo-Malay region which includes India, Malaysia, and significant portions of South Asia, as well as through the Middle East and both the East and West African regions.

The role of the major Sufi poets, saints, and writers who acted as ambassadors for this less theologically inclined understanding of Islam has been missed in the traditional World History classroom. The works of people such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti in India, Rumi's poetry, Saadi's *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden), or Qayyam's epic *Rubaiyat* (The Vineyard), as well as the world travels of the young Moroccan Ibn Battuta can all offer incredible insights into the human experience of Islamic society. Islam is not a monolith; not everyone is Arabic. The Sufis shouldered the difficult task of bringing Islam into regions like South Asia where Hindu/Buddhist practices are common, or West Africa where animist traditions have been practiced before even the emergence of Judaism.

Sufism is a vehicle by which Islam can spread its message, but it is also one that stands in contrast to the stereotype of the Arab Bedouin rising out of the desert clutching his sword. Rather, by teaching the importance of Sufism, by describing the ascetics who brought forth a passionate interpretation of Islam that emphasizes social justice and human rights, and who absorbed the practices and traditions of the communities to which they preached, we could develop a fuller narrative and better communicate the diversity of Islam. This contribution is essential to explaining the multi-faceted nature of Islam and to counter the stereotypical interpretations of it being spread by the sword by foreign Bedouin invaders. The Islamic experiences in the Indo-Malaya and African regions were uniquely influenced more by the contributions of Sufis saints and poets than by Arab Bedouins.

Why is it important to include Sufism in explaining the diversity of Islam when teaching about Islam in World History classrooms? It is vital to

explain the diversity of Islam because Sufism enables us to critically delve into many of the cultural and social dynamics of Islam. According to Renard, in "Sufism, emphasizing a direct relationship with God was very effective in regions of the world where people did not speak Arabic as their native [language] such as India, Indonesia, and Swahili/East African Coast" [9]. The majority of the world's Muslims are Sunni Hanafis, members of the most liberal of the Sunni schools; many of the Sufis belong to this school of thought, which accepts the interpretation of Islam that is tolerant of other cultures. It is this softer interpretation of Islam that allows for its proponents in places like India to absorb the Hindu or Buddhist traditions of the native populations.

3. Empires of South Asia: The Mughals

The Mughal Empire in South Asia represents certain important developments in Islamic history because in their section of the Indian sub-continent they practiced Sunni-Hanafism, the oldest and most liberal school of Sunni Islam. However, they were separated from their Sunni brethren during the Ottoman Empire by the Safavid Empire in Persia, a people who practiced Ismaili Shia. The Mughals had a tenuous relationship with the Safavids because the Kabul side of Afghanistan was Sunni but Herat remained Shia; this was a buffer for the Sunnis, helping them to contain the spread of Shia Islam.

Ironically, the version of Islam practiced in Mughal India was Sunni Hanafism; the language of Farsi (Persia) and Kanun/law (secular) represented a break from the traditional Islamic empire [8]. While Arabic was venerated as the language of the Quran and the Prophet, the majority of the Muslim population had a uniquely Asian flavor. For example, the marriage of Akbar the Great to Jodh Bhai, who was the queen of the Hindu Rajputs, would never have been possible in the Umayyad Empire. Beyond being blasphemous, this marriage would not be allowed under a strict interpretation of Islamic law. This difference in the Umayyad administration is just one means of highlighting the key philosophical differences in Mughal India; another is the rejection of the Jizya tax for non-Muslims.

Furthermore, the Mughals' Siraj ud-Daula was nineteen when he fought the British in the Battle of Plassey; this conflict represented a critical juncture in world history and a major shift in global power. After the fall of the Mughals, European colonialism would arrest the spread of Islamic power in South Asia. Moreover, this shift represented a check in the initial spread and dominance of Islam in a region

which was increasingly secular and non-Arab. As instructors in World History, we can benefit greatly by teaching this episode because it will allow us to explain the diverse nature of Islam. This is why it should be afforded a space in our curricula when teaching World History lessons to our students.

4. Merits of Islam: The Historical “Other”

Today we teach a student population that is more diverse and dynamic than in years past. The students we have today are “Global Citizens” who are impacted by world events, such as the recent United Nations vote to give Palestine observer status at the United Nations, seating their representatives right next to those sent by the Vatican. Our students live in a world that is shrinking, and the interactions between different societies have come into closer focus.

We need to develop a fuller pedagogical dialogue that will bring into the classroom the voice of the historical “other” and give agency to those who have previously been left out of history. This requires vision and innovation in our teaching, two goals which are not impossible so long as we plan to teach Islam as a social movement and something more than merely the rise of Arabian Bedouins out of the desert to conquer foreign lands. Instead, we must develop a dialogue that emphasizes the human experience and gives voice to a more global interpretation of the development and evolution of Islam, and why it should be afforded a place in World History classrooms on its own as topic for both examination and research.

5. Conclusion

I will put together a short set of recommended readings, as well as videos to help with executing lessons for a typical undergraduate course.

7. References

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