

“Those Who Sing Pray Twice” Tazim R. Kassam, Syracuse University



Tazim R. Kassam is Associate Professor of Religion at Syracuse University. A historian of religions specializing in the Islamic tradition, her research interests include gender, ritual, devotional literature, and syncretism. Her book, Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance (SUNY Press: 1995) explores the origins and creative synthesis of Hindu-Muslim ideas expressed in the song tradition of the Ismaili Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent.

No feature of religious life stands out with greater clarity for me than the fact of prayer intoned, chanted, sung. I remember being bundled into the car as a child on our trips to the coast in Kenya and even before my father had shifted into gear, he would have begun to sing a *ginan*, *b hajan*

, or *geet* (all devotional songs in Hindi or Gujarati). No journey was without them. We also took along a collection of cassette tapes of devotional songs. There seemed nothing unusual about singing

ginans

or hearing

qawwalis

on the way to the beach, city, or school.

Ginans

, a tradition of hymns composed by Ismaili Muslim saints in South Asia, were an integral, daily feature of religious services which took place in the

jamatkhanas

or prayer assemblies, both in the morning and evening. As a child, I learned to articulate my first requests to God and to express my first feelings of devotion and surrender through the language and music of

ginans

. Singing was a thoroughly portable and enjoyable activity and I was convinced God paid special attention to prayers which were soulfully sung. Later, when I began to study religion academically, it came as quite a shock to me that one could dedicate years to reading, translating and analyzing sacred writings and not once hear them recited or performed in their

liturgical settings. How was it possible to appreciate the aesthetic, emotional, social and cultural aspects of the Qur'an, Bhagavad Gita, Torah, and countless other scriptures and devotions without reference to and knowledge of their performance? I was to take up

ginans

as the focus of my specialized research, and to this day, when I pick up a book of

ginans

, my first impulse is not to read them as words on the page but to hear them as the melodic hymns they are meant to be.

A dimension of religious life which is not easily accessible in the context of teaching about religions, however, is religious experience and practice. Although the category of religious experience is presumed to be primary, the academic study of religion occupies itself mainly with its theological, symbolic and cognitive manifestations. Religious experience as such remains private, subjective, mysterious, and inaccessible, and is discovered or imagined principally through its mediated expressions in scripture, practices, and institutions. Although increasing attention is being paid to the performative aspects of religion in scholarship, the methods of experiential learning, ethnographic investigation, and participant-observation which are central to disciplines such as anthropology have not been readily embraced by nor incorporated into the pedagogy of religious studies. This is the case for a variety of reasons, with perhaps the principal one being the risks of blurring the line between advocacy and detachment, prescription and description, subjectivity and objectivity (dubious though these categories may be to postmodern critics). Hence, apart from the occasional 'field trips' to mosques, synagogues and powwows, the principal avenue of approach to understanding religious life remains the study of texts. The purpose of this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* is to advocate a greater integration of performance approaches into the study and teaching of religion. The articles gathered here suggest that it is possible to encounter and explore religious experience through another window, namely, the performance and practices of sacred music traditions.

Central aspects of religions which exclusively textual approaches fail to capture are its aesthetic and synaesthetic dimensions. Oral and musical expressions of religious life are first and foremost sounded things: vibrations and movements experienced as rhythm, pitch, and duration. They often belong to ritual contexts which evoke all the senses through gesture, dance, music, incense, food, and brilliant colors. Internal senses of cognition and imagination are also evoked through storytelling, symbolism and ritual drama. In *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Jonathan Z. Smith notes that "Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest" (28). The performance of sacred music as ritual brings one back to one's senses and intensifies attention to the present moment. As a synaesthetic experience, ritual is a reminder that the origin of meaning or worldview is fundamentally rooted in the experience of the body in its own world, and the myriad feelings, sensations, and cognitions that arise from this dynamic interaction. Music helps draw attention back to be-ing, that is, to the category of experience and its nature as process, enactment, and embodiment.

The sensual impact of litany, chant and song mark interest and call attention through the evocation of feelings and aspirations. As textualists accustomed to thinking of sacred texts as words rather than as soundings, and analyzing them primarily as historical documents and sources of belief and doctrine, it is possible to miss their fundamental basis in human and social activity. The very articulation of speech or production of sound is an action which draws attention to the here and the now and engages participants personally and socially. As a social event, performance involves actors and doings which are rooted in a particular culture at a given historical moment. Examining these particularities of performance discloses the dialogical and dialectical relations between religious experience and cultural system, and how each structures and reshapes the other. In *The Anthropology of Experience*, Edward Bruner observes that “Expressions are constitutive and shaping, not as abstract texts but in the activity that actualizes the text. It is in this sense that the text must be performed to be experienced” (7). Therefore, the exercise of situating sacred music within precise historical and social contexts provides an opportunity to examine the dynamics of cultural change, difference, and transformation. Of the various artistic expressions of religion, sacred music often conveys in the most poignant and powerful manner a given culture’s aesthetic ideals, and marries them to its spiritual technologies of transformation. Principles of beauty, perfection, and the good, irrespective of their specific cultural definitions, are frequently identified as one. A well-known *hadith*

attributed to Prophet Muhammad says: “God is beautiful and loves all Beauty.” In the Islamic world, the Qur’an is experienced not only as the Word of God, but also as a literary masterpiece and a spell-binding vocal art. Its beauty is rehearsed through the senses by hearing it artfully recited, beholding its verses in elegant calligraphy, and feeling the power of its words move the heart. Stories abound within the Muslim tradition about rulers and paupers alike who, on hearing the Qur’an, were moved to tears. The philosopher al-Ghazali wrote that verses of the Qur’an could induce ecstasy (

wajd

) in the listener, and argued that religious music should be permitted as a form of worship, as it prepared the heart to intensify worship of God. Aesthetic pleasures that celebrate the glory of God and creation are thus theorized as forms of prayer. Islamic literature is replete with imagery and allusions which take for granted that beauty in the world was created by God for enjoyment and God’s praise. The Sufis developed Ibn Sina’s position that pleasure is rooted in the human soul and is a path to spiritual joy and release. Sufis emphasize cultivating love of God through taking delight in the beautiful. The heart — the organ that loves God — is quickened by religious music which, practiced properly, induces states of trance and ecstasy. In the following verses, the famous poet Rumi describes himself, the lover, as the reed which sings its sad and soulful melodies in search of its divine beloved:

Hearken to this reed forlorn, breathing since ‘twas torn

From its rushy bed, a strain of impassioned love and pain.

The secret of my song, though near, none can see and none can hear.

Oh, for a Friend to know the sign and mingle all His soul with mine!

As guest editor, I invited contributors to this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* to reflect on how and why they have used musical resources, very broadly defined, to teach courses in religious studies, and to describe their aims, methods, and experiences of teaching their courses on religion with music. The articles argue how and why a study of sacred music deepens students' appreciation of the manifold aspects of religious life, and encourage readers to consider how they too might integrate sacred musical traditions into their teaching. The articles also respond to how traditions of sacred music help engage issues of identity, religious change, ritual process, and communal worship which arise when analyzing the musical examples and performances within specific historical and social contexts. Illustrating how they have used music as a primary source in their courses, our contributors provide theoretical arguments in support of doing so and offer specific pedagogical techniques, and music and audiovisual resources for teachers.

Does one have to be trained in music to use musical sources in teaching? While it may be an advantage, Guy Beck and Steven Marini argue that it is not a prerequisite. Does simply hearing sacred music make it comprehensible? Vivian-Lee Nyitray talks about ways of avoiding the wallpaper effect of music and teaching students how to listen attentively and critically. What can we learn from ethnomusicologists who teach students what to listen for and how to analyze music? Carol Babiracki speaks to the point that the sacred music of other cultures is unfamiliar not only from the point of view of sound, but cultural meaning. At the same time, cross-fertilization of sacred musical traditions is to be found in many traditions. Vernon Schubel explores the links between the string instruments of the Islamic world as precursors of the medieval lute and modern guitar, and uses music to make Islam less alien. Jacob Jacobson uses the variety of Jewish music to problematize the question of identity: What is Jewish about Jewish music? Indeed, is religious music too narrowly construed in religious studies? Uliss Masen urges that the music of environmental activists be considered religious in as much as it expresses veneration for nature and creates *communitas*. Not all religious music has lyrics or word texts. Ina Frandrich draws students into an appreciation of the 'heartbeat' of earth-based indigenous religions through workshops in African and Native American drumming. In sum, sacred sound provides an infinite number of entry points into religious life and history, and lends itself very well to multidisciplinary, cross-cultural study.

References

- Bruner, Edward. *The Anthropology of Experience*. University of Illinois Press: 1986.
- Smith, Jonathon Z. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. University of Chicago Press: 1987.