RUMI AND SUFISM’S PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE
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Abstract: Thomas Aquinas, the Western contemporary of Persian mystic and poet, Rumi, identified Divine love as the medium through which Divine law is executed by human beings, thereby denoting the necessity of love in religion. This essay aims to explain the doctrine of love, as expounded in the verses of Rumi, in relation to the religious order with which he was affiliated, Sufism. Sufism is a separately designated esoteric branch of Islam originating in the East, with its ascetic followers renowned for their spellbound states of rapture. The majority of the original Sufis were public figures in positions of political authority, but attempting to pinpoint an accurate chronological origin for Sufism proves difficult, as the traits which define the Sufis were present even in the earliest centuries of Islam. Nile Green, however, attributes the appearance of Sufism as a collective movement to the ninth century CE, with the earliest Sufis to be the likes of Rabi’ah al-Basriyyah and Ibrahim ibn Adham. The study of Sufism without experience of its devotional practices was classed as deeply restrictive by al-Ghazali, the Muslim intellectual who declared Sufism to be the only manner of understanding the meaning of life. He says, ‘how great a difference there is between your knowing the definition and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your being healthy and sated’ (Path to Sufism, 52). Rumi is now one of the most widely translated poets in the world, his poems are routinely filleted for ‘life-lessons’ which are devoid of their original Sufi context. This essay aims to restore the philosophico-religious context for Rumi’s teachings and explain the significance of his discourse on love with respect to Sufist doctrine.

Keywords: Persian Poetry, Rumi, Sufism, Mathnawi, Divine Love, Oneness, Philosophy of Love, Self-renunciation.

Sufism’s philosophy of love, as poeticized by the thirteenth-century Eastern mystic, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, postulates an evolutionary and transcendent process which corresponds directly with the doctrine propounded by the Islamic Weltanschauung. Initially appearing to be a discourse on the cosmopolitan nature of love, Rumi’s six volume magnum opus, al-Mathnawi al-Ma’nawi (Mathnawi), articulates the theory of the destruction of the ego and subsequent attainment of the status of a ‘perfect’ being through the medium of divine love. Rumi employs a pedagogical stance through numerous aphoristic stories where the focal points demonstrate the limitations of rationality in comprehending the meaning of life. His philosophical approach replaces the pejorative notion of stifling religious discourses with a positive outlook by presenting the universal language of
love as the most important precept required for moral, social, political and religious success. This essay provides a reading of excerpts from the first volume, in order to illustrate the manner in which the poetry becomes a treatise on Sufism by exploring the intimate connection between the poetry and Sufism’s principal tenet of love, with reference to other relevant beliefs found within the philosophy. It is important to note that what will be referred to as Rumi’s philosophy is Rumi’s interpretation of Sufism, and what will occasionally be referred to as mysticism or mystical philosophy is in fact Sufism.

Rumi’s work is an amalgamation of stories, proverbial and prophetic statements, and Qur’anic verses. Although the resulting composition has been criticised by many a reader as rambling, the Mathnawi in fact has been thought to reflect the intermittent nature of the work’s composition, with Rumi apparently surrendering to spontaneous surges of creative inspiration, during which he would request that his scribe resumed writing. The lack of conventional organisation in the digressive nature of the work also reflects the work’s aim of transcending all normative structures and should therefore come as no surprise. Furthermore, Rumi’s fundamental rule to give prevalence to an experiential notion of love, rather than conceptual love, is wholly reflected within his work as attested to by Franklin Lewis, who claims that Rumi’s stylistic aim was rhetorical elegance and his literary and instructional aim was to highlight the heurism present in his subject matters. If Rumi had wished to do so, Lewis says, he ‘could have written a more traditional and systematic exposition of his ideas’ because he was ‘certainly conversant with other theological, ethical and legal treatises composed in the style of the “systematic” medieval works of this nature’ (Lewis 2000, 395). Thus, the lack of theosophical speculation and the deliberate departure from the conventional styles of works such as al-Attar’s ‘Conference of the Birds’ was intentional on Rumi’s part.

The Mathnawi cannot be contextualised without understanding Sufism as an esoteric branch of belief. Al-Ghazali (eleventh-century, Muslim theologian) describes Sufism as the corollary of the disinclination ‘to return to servile conformism once it has been abandoned, since a prerequisite for being a servile conformist is that one does not know himself to be such’ (2006, 25). Rumi derisively refers to such conformity numerous times, and declares Sufism’s dogma of intuition to transcend it, saying, ‘I belong entirely to God, I do not belong to any one (else)/ And that which I am doing for God's sake is not (done in) conformity, it is not fancy and opinion, it is naught but intuition’ (Mathnawi I, 3805-6). William Chittick describes the spiritual path of the mystic to be an alchemical transmutation of ‘the base copper of his substance into pure and noble gold’ (Chittick 1983, 11), and Rumi’s work embodies this definition too, describing God as ‘an alchemist’ and further stating, ‘what
is alchemy (compared with His action)?’ In fact, ‘He is a giver of miracles (to prophets)—what is magic (compared with these miracles)?’ (Mathnawi, 516). Lewis provides the following conclusive definition of Sufism:

Sufism entails a pious orientation toward religion privileging the spiritual over the material, self-renunciation exercises and other forms of discipline as a means to approach God. In some individuals it might also include a predilection for divine visions, including lights, glimpses of heaven, angels, or even God (Lewis 2000, 21).

Rumi’s poetry posits knowledge of this philosophy, its practical implementation and a subsequent recognition of the Beloved via acknowledgement of the human being’s narrow precincts as the conditions required in order to achieve the status of a true mystic.

In the Mathnawi’s proem, ‘The Song of the Reed’ (Book 1, lines 1-34), Rumi introduces what he considers to be a universal grievance by providing the persona, a freshly plucked reed, with a voice to lament its separation from the flower bed, allegorising the separation of a lover from the beloved: ‘Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan’ (line 2). Rumi delineates the plaint as the constant yearning of all living entities to escape a fragmented state by returning to a condition of unification with the beloved who, in Sufism, is God: ‘Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it’ (4). The exordium places two conditions upon the audience of the song, without which they cannot understand the meaning of the reed’s complaint: to have a ‘bosom torn by severance’ (3) and to be ‘ripe’ (18). The former indicates the emotional naivety of the one who does not perceive God as the creator and thus does not comprehend his/her state to be separate from its origin, and the latter proposes the inexperienced nature of the ‘raw’ human being who has never achieved spiritual union with God. The universality of this yearning does not translate identically for everyone, and Rumi depicts the idiosyncratic manifestation of this longing within each individual as a consequence of subjectively interpreting a feeling which in reality emanates only from one origin. ‘Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me’ (6), says the reed, implying that regardless of its secret’s applicability to everyone, the only relatability people find in its lament is limited to that which they have experienced, and not what they have sought. For Rumi, knowledge of God can only be sought after understanding that love presides over and illuminates an otherwise restrictive discourse. The pen, metonymically referring to intellectual discourses, ‘split upon itself as
soon as it came to Love’ (114), says Rumi. ‘The intellect lay down (helplessly) like an ass in the mire: it was Love (alone) that uttered the explanation of love and loverhood’ (115), and thus, ‘the crow, who disbelieves in the (absolute) authority of the Divine destiny, is an infidel, though he have thousands of wits’ (Mathnawi I, 1229). The term ‘infidel’ presents the dichotomy between knowledge and faith in its very notion of the failure of fidelity to the Divine because of a limited and subjective interpretation of knowledge. As such, Rumi imposes upon his readers the recognition of Divine destiny in order to proceed to Divine love.

Rumi employs many methods in an attempt to illustrate that which he claims is ultimately inexplicable, and one of his strategies is expanded upon by Manijeh Mannani:

In Sufi literature, sublime love almost always manifests itself in the form of the amorous relationship between two earthly lovers who have to overcome various obstacles in order to be one. The irresistible attraction of the sublime for the seeker is symbolically conveyed through lines depicting the physical beauty of an earthly beloved, and the pain of separation from the Divine through images that project a yearning lover whose existence is meaningless without her. (Mannani 2010, 162)

Thus, when Rumi proposes the existence of love to be a proof of the existence of a meta-being, he does so based upon the inexplicable nature of love which asserts itself even in a passive state. This is illustrated in the tale of the king, when the woman he inadvertently falls in love with becomes terminally ill and the king implores the physicians saying, ‘The life of us both is in your Hands/ My life is of no account, (but) she is the life of my life. I am in pain and wounded: she is my remedy’ (Mathnawi I, 44-5). Rumi describes the fusional power of amorous love in binding the lover and beloved into a mental, emotional and potentially physical state of union, the same principle of unification which is found in the second type of love which the allegorical tale indicates and later explicitly expresses: divine love. As the king despairingly realises that the treatment of the physicians is increasingly unsuccessful, he effaces his independence from a meta-being by beseeching God for a non-medicinal cure. This stage of self-effacement or the removal of the ‘I’ manifests itself in the story: ‘He entered the mosque and advanced to the mihrab (to pray): the prayer-carpet was bathed in the king’s tears/ On coming to himself out of the flood of ecstasy (fana) he opened his lips in goodly praise and laud’ (ibid., 56-7).Through this tale, Rumi advocates the position of annihilation through love, wherein the spiritual ‘death’ of the lover results in the ability to glorify the Divine beloved.
Iqbal Ashraf argues that a theological stance of this kind requires a pantheistic notion of the superiority attributed to the beloved, proven by sections of the poetry which assert that God ‘is like the spirit, and the world is like the body’ (Ashraf 2012, 1764). He claims that Rumi ‘believed that individual egos originate in an Infinite Self, become fragmented (separated) from the Whole, and then ever yearn to return to that level of consciousness and love and fulfil their destiny as Infinite Being’ (ibid., xxvi). According to Ashraf, therefore, Rumi’s acceptance of the world as an emanation is not an intellectual proposition; it is a purely mystical encounter germane to the highest forms of faith. However, Reynold Nicholson presents a stronger argument, stating that Rumi is not the proponent of pantheism that a first reading of his Mathnawi may suggest (quoted in Bausani 1968, 10). Pantheism involves a view of God as impersonal and of the universe as an emanation, whereas in reality Rumi proposes God to be the artist, the world to be the masterpiece, and the individual fragments to be created by deliberate divine will instead of emanated through unconscious reflection: ‘God hath fashioned the earth and the sky, He hath raised in the midst much fire and light/ (He made) this earth for those (created) of clay, (He made) heaven to be the abode of the celestials’ (Mathnawi I, 2387-8).

The central point of difference between the aforementioned scholars concerns Rumi’s teachings on the acquisition of love. Ashraf claims Rumi’s argument to be the acknowledgement of God’s existence and subsequent love for him through the act of observing the creation which itself is a reflection of God. Consequently, the dualistic core of each human being composed of both divine and finite matter is attracted to both the meta-being and to the universe and, so, when viewed along the part/whole continuum, love of the emanation of the divine, which itself is seen in the creation, leads to the Neo-Platonic Source. Nicholson’s view on Rumi’s understanding of love relies on the monotheistic belief of God as creator and the universe as a creation, with an ensuing dichotomisation of existence and non-existence. Therefore, ‘with a God so mighty that in a moment He causes a hundred worlds like ours to come into existence from non-existence’ (Mathnawi I, 522), the Divine for Rumi is beyond the realms and the terminology of ‘existence’ and ‘non-existence’. Chittick expands on this, stating Rumi’s view to be that ‘nonexistence is God’s workshop, wherein He produces the things and bestows existence upon them. If we desire existence, it is absurd for us to seek for it here among the already existent things. We must seek for it there with Him.’ (Chittick 1983, 177) Unlike the later Kantian rejection of a mind-independent world which results in the necessity of the mind to inspect the world surrounding it in order to form judgements, Rumi’s
mystical philosophy of love then requires the human lover to look beyond the existing creation and into non-existence to see the ‘workshop’ of God.

The fundamental Islamic theological principle of ‘Oneness’ (Tawhid) stemming from the core monotheistic belief of Islam as encapsulated in the Word of Purity (Kalimah at-Tayyibah) is central to Rumi’s mystical methodology of love.

Sufis had contemplated the deeper meaning and sacrality of the phrase, noting that it begins with the principle of negation (la) sweeping away idolatry of false gods (elaha), before leading to the affirmation of God. The Sufis took this as confirmation of their belief that a worshipper must first pursue the via negativa, obliterating all trace of idolatry and disciplining the concupiscent self until it achieves self-effacement (fana) in the divine. After sweeping away these obstacles, one could then set out on the via positiva, leading to the meeting with God, who stands at the end of the journey. (Lewis 2000, 129-30)

Al-Ghazali explicates the concept by apportioning it chronologically into four stages: verbal utterance, confirmation via the heart, receiving inner light and finally seeing nothing but God (2003, n.p.). Acknowledging this spiritual journey, Rumi regards the finite nature of the material world as a barrier to ‘Reality’, resulting in a human being’s distance from the Divine because of disproportionate attentiveness to the earthly life (Mathnawi I, 409-525). For Rumi, incorporation of the Islamic Word of Purity is synonymous with awakening to a divine presence through negation of the self’s independence from the Divine followed by a union (Tawhid) with the Divine through apophatic mystical experience. Furthermore, Rumi discredits the impeding nature of cataphatic theological verbal dialogue as an external obstruction to this path of unification by projecting his view of the unconstrained attainment of love to be through the internal communion with God (Ashraf 2012, 64): ‘Outward speech and talk is as dust: do thou for a time make a habit of silence’ (Mathnawi I, 575-7).

Rumi advocates Sufism’s view of the human being’s development being contingent upon a theistic paradigm: through mystical enlightenment, the subject achieves the potential to annihilate himself and subsequently achieve the status of the Perfect being. Expanding upon this, Rumi discusses the importance of companionship in the mystic’s journey. The one oblivious to the companion as being a mere means to find the Divine is likened to the one chasing the shadow of the bird in place of the
bird itself, assuming that the shadow is the goal (ibid., 421). Rumi then explains that ‘the shadow of God is that servant of God who is dead to this world and living through God’ (ibid., 423), a companion who embodies the spirit of perfection but only via God.

Furthering the notion of companionship which Rumi personally found in Shams ad-Din Tabrez, Salah ad-Din Zarkoub and Husam ad-Din Chalabi, Rumi presents a view which can be understood in light of Alain Badiou’s philosophy of fidelity. Badiou’s subject is formed through fidelity to the truth event of love amongst other events, which to an extent is also seen in Rumi’s work where the occurrence of love can only reach the divine through progressing in fidelity to it. However, Rumi theorises the concept of the subject’s removal of subjectivity via an event created by a human being and governed by intervening Divine will which assists the person in accordance with the extent of his/her investment in God:

Oh, the life of lovers consists in death: thou wilt not win the (Beloved's) heart except in losing thine own.
I sought (to win) His heart with a hundred airs and graces, (but) He made excuses to me (put me off) in disdain.
I said, ‘After all, this mind and soul (of mine) are drowned in Thee’. ‘Begone’, said He, ‘begone! Do not chant these spells over Me’ (do not seek thus to beguile Me).
Do not I know what thought thou hast conceived? O thou who hast seen double, how hast thou regarded the Beloved? (Mathnawi I, 1751-4)

It is entirely arguable that Rumi views companionship of a ‘shadow of God’ to be the event which transforms the subject into a being of perfection because of its connection with divine perfection. Penning a couplet in accordance with the Islamic prophetic aphorism, ‘The believer is the mirror of the believer’ (Aflaki 2002, 354), Rumi says: ‘Oh, many an iniquity that you see in others is your own nature (reflected) in them, O reader’ (Mathnawi I, 1319). The notion of unity between believers results in mutual reflection, implying the ubiquitous manifestation of Divine perfection through all human beings who are united with God: ‘That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt, the heart which receives images innumerable/ That Moses (the perfect saint) holds in his bosom the formless infinite form of the Unseen (reflected) from the mirror of his heart’ (ibid., 3485-6). For Rumi, becoming a reflection of the Divine is possible only when the heart is pure, a state which is achieved through ‘expulsion from the heart of all love other than Divine Love’ (Khan 2005, 99), thereby allowing the human being to become, via reflection, the holistic perfect being. The repeated notion of the perfect
being models itself upon ‘the Prophet Muhammad who, as the Logos, is the archetype and final cause of creation. In him the supreme idea of humanity is realised’ (Ashraf 2012, 247). Chittick provides the following definition:

The prototype of both the microcosm and the macrocosm is the Universal or Perfect Man (\textit{al-insan al-kamil}), who is the sum total of all levels of reality in a permanent synthesis. All the Divine Qualities are contained within him and integrated together ...

from the Islamic point of view Muhammad is the perfect synthesis. (2005, 50)

In order for any human to receive guidance towards love at a transcendental level, the ‘raw’ body and spirit must primarily be exposed to a cleansing destructive fire which eradicates any obstructions. Rumi expounds this argument with the story of Adam’s exile from Paradise, proposing the Islamic notion of Adam’s placement on earth as an agent of God to be the result of a prolonged period of supplication for forgiveness, and thereby attaining a closer spiritual proximity to the Divine. ‘If thou art from the back of Adam’, says Rumi, referring to the monotheistic theological belief of mankind’s genesis, then ‘prepare a desert of heart-fire (burning grief) and eye-water (tears): the garden is made open (blooming) by cloud and sun’ (\textit{Mathnawi} I, 1636-7). The mystical burning of the spirit in order to eliminate any materials which contaminate the mystic’s transformation from ‘copper’ to ‘gold’ is essential in the transformative procedure of love leading to a concept which Rumi reiterates several times and posits as the ultimate finale of life: divine unity through humanity’s holism.

Rumi’s concept of holism as founded upon love leads to the belief of love to be the music to which nature revolves, thereby emulating a Pythagorean approach in attesting to the macrocosmic celestial spheres forming an ordered harmonised pattern because of the synchronised union of all microcosms. \textit{Vis à vis} individuals, holism – developed by J.C. Smuts from the original Greek term \textit{holos} – is the unification of the body, mind and spirit in an internal and external conformation to the requisites of love, the highest requisite being that ‘a person should submit his self to higher Self’ (Ashraf 2012, 34). This can be understood further through reference to a particular reading (1971) of Olson’s \textit{The Maximus Poems} by the poet Jeremy Prynne, who expands upon a similar concept by claiming the human condition to be that of ‘being’ rather than ‘meaning\(^2\), by which he means that every person forms a part of a celestial whole which follows the ‘curvature of the universe’ which is love\(^3\). As such, the condition of love is greater even than the whole, because love is, in fact, the ‘First Mover\(^4\) and it is the condition which in turn creates the condition of ‘home’. For Rumi, the presence
of love reinforces the condition of ‘home’ to be unification with the Divine. If love is able to unite the human being with the universe, then its transcendental power can further empower the human being to achieve union with the Divine.

Rumi discourages the idea of the believer as an unthinking conformist because of the nature of holism which requires the human being to combine reason, meditation and experience in order to experience the truth rather than accept it. The state of annihilation of the self in mysticism is to declare and to believe that there exists no self, and all is done only through the Self (of the Divine). Thus, al-Hallaj as the mystic executed for proclaiming ‘I am God’ (O’Leary 1951, 60) was the real embodiment of self-effacement through the principle of Tawhid, and Rumi acknowledges this level of self-renunciation, saying, ‘Do not lay tasks on me, for I have passed away from myself (fanā); my apprehensions are blunted and I know not how to praise/Everything that is said by one who has not returned to consciousness is unseemly’ (Mathnawi I, 128-9). Self-annihilation in mystical philosophy, seen in Buddhism as reaching the Unconditioned state, refers to a level of spiritual perfection which merges the human being with the Divine along a conceptual vertical axis and with knowledge along a horizontal axis. ‘In self-loss, O venerated friend, thou wilt find the jurisprudence of jurisprudence, the grammar of grammar, and the accidence of accidence’ (ibid., 2847).

Chittick argues that while Rumi’s discourse is rooted in monotheistic beliefs, ‘the student of his works must himself provide a framework’ (1983, 13) within which the spiritual exposition of Rumi can be understood. Disregarding his philosophy based on his theistic-centred approach in the treatise is to disregard his understanding of love’s transformative power and inexplicable nature, as attested to by Rumi himself: ‘Whatsoever I say in exposition and explanation of Love, when I come to Love (itself) I am ashamed of that (explanation)/ Although the commentary of the tongue makes (all) clear, yet tongue-less love is clearer’ (Mathnawi I, 112-3). Rumi asserts the presence of the innate and metaphysical feeling of love to be the ultimate proof that God has placed it amongst mankind in order to allow people to recognise and reach him as the ultimate Beloved: ‘Whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder’ (ibid., 111). Through versifying the core tenets of Sufism, Rumi strives to prove the transcendental nature of love as it causes the human being to evolve spiritually from a primary subjective state to a perfected state of objectivity. The one wishing intellectually to understand what Rumi expounds is first presented with a caveat: ‘Ask thy wish, but ask with measure: a blade of straw will not support the mountain’ (ibid., 140).
Notes

1. Al-Ghazali reaches this conclusion after feeling overwhelming perplexity at the ease with which people conform to what they define as normative patterns. After a lengthy period of study, he divided the entire sum of knowledge into four categories, the first three of which he determines to be erroneous for various reasons: The Mutakallimun, the Batinites, the Philosophers, and the Sufis. (Chittick 2006, 24).

2. ‘We participate in the condition of being. And the condition of being is thankfully beyond the condition of meaning’ (Prynne 1971, n.p.).

3. ‘... that curvature is present continuously in what we hear. It becomes the singular condition, so that everything we take is literal, and not an instance of something else, we escape the metaphor. ... you can also have the particular condition of transpiring through the noble arc, from the land to the shore, from the shore to the sea, from the sea to the ocean, from the ocean to the void, from the void to the horizontal curve, which is love. You have the condition. You turn it round. You bring it all back in. You come right down, and you are home.’ (Prynne 1971, n.p.).

4. ‘... in all the ancient cosmologies, the planets were moved by love, or carried round. The First Mover was certainly love.’ (Prynne 1971, n.p.)

References


