

## **Religious Pluralism in Rumi's thought: In Times of Dialogue of Civilizations**

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### **Abstract**

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*Jalaluddin Rumi is one of those mystics, poets and thinkers who have taught the message of peace and love. His significance has been acknowledged globally, leading UNESCO, for example, declare 2007 as the "Rumi Year." This paper discusses Rumi's approach to religious pluralism based on his poetry and prose. The paper examines how different subjective experiences without having a holistic picture of the same reality can lead to misunderstandings. Rumi demonstrates the dictum 'we see things not as they are but as we are', through his symbolic stories two of which have been analyzed in the paper. Rumi's pluralistic worldview though has always remained important, but it has become particularly urgent in today's times of 'clash of civilizations.' His wise counsel of not stopping at subjective and fragmented view of things, but trying to see a holistic picture, and from different perspectives can help better understand, our own as well as other, cultures and civilizations.*

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**Key words:** Jalaluddin Rumi, *Hikayat-i Rumi*, Sufism, religious pluralism, mysticism, Qur'anic pluralism, dialogue of civilizations

### **Introduction**

Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), better known by Persians and Afghans as "Jalaluddin Balkhi"; and in Indian sub-continent as "Mawlana Rumi", is regarded as one of the great poets, jurist, Sufi mystics, theologians of the Muslim world (Moyne, 1998). Ihsanoglu (2006), the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) describes him as "One of the greatest spiritual masters and poetical geniuses of all times whose views have left an indelible impact on the mystic world." His stature could be gauged by the words and utterances used for him by many Sufis. Jami', the poet-Sufi, for example, terms Rumi's *Mathnawi* as the Qur'an in Pehlavi language (Nomani, 1971). Rumi has also been described as "Sultan of Wise, shining light of God, illuminating the darkness, an imam, son of an imam, support of Islam, a guide of the people who leads them into God's glorious presence" (Cowan, 1992, p. 26). Rumi not only spoke to his own times, but still continues to inspire within and outside Muslim lands by his pluralistic outlook and spiritual teachings. He could rightly be called a timeless poet (Arberry, 1979).

Cowan tells us that the influence of Rumi's poetry, particularly that of the Mathnawi, has extended globally. In the Indian sub-continent, his work has been read not only just among various Sufi orders, but equally among the commoners, as well as by certain learned Brahmins. Shams, Rumi's master, himself has become a well-known figure in Indo-Moslem folk poetry where he is portrayed as a martyr of love. It is reported that the Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) loved the Mathnawi, and we know that Rumi's works were much respected at Shah Jahan's court (ruled 1627-1658). In Kashmir, Afghanistan, Persia, and throughout the Mogul Empire, his works were regarded with high esteem. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that his works were first translated into European languages. The German reading public was quick to appreciate his *ghazals*, which were championed by both Goethe and Hegel. Parts of the Mathnawi appeared in English in 1881, translated by the British scholar, James Redhouse, but it was not until 1898 that a selection from the *Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz* was translated into English by the noted orientalist R. A. Nicholson. Thus, Rumi's popularity has reached to far-flung areas of the globe, much farther than Rumi's original home, Balkh. One, out of many possible reasons, why he has been so well received, is his universalistic teachings that appeal to multitude of readers. His pluralistic readings and interpretations of lived experiences of mankind make sense to all who believe in the brotherhood of humankind. This article focuses on his religious pluralistic ideas that help us appreciate human experiences as diverse yet unified in their depth.

## Diversity of Human Experiences

Rumi's approach to religious pluralism is based on two major premises: the nature of human experience of the divine, and how human beings perceive and experience the reality differently. His deep mystical and poetic insights lead him to the realization of the complexity of human condition and experience in the physical world. By using stories (*hikayaat*), or metaphors (*amthaal*), Rumi demonstrates how human perceptions and experiences of the divine are subjective, leading to multiple perspectives. He shows how this multiplicity can be resolved through a broader understanding of the 'whole'. By using everyday simple stories and metaphors, Rumi attempts to demonstrate the validity of what we today call "religious pluralism". He was perhaps attempting to show the problems of 'exclusive' truth claims of certain views of his time, and replace them with 'inclusiveness' not just through theological judgements, but through irrefutable lived human experiences. In order to demonstrate this, we focus here on two of his numerous stories detailed in his *Mathnavi*: The elephant in the dark; and Prophet Moses. We will briefly describe these stories and suggest their interpretations based on the literature.

### The Elephant in the Dark

*Mathnavi* narrates that a couple of Indians took an elephant to a place in Persia where, according to the story, the people had not seen an elephant. The elephant was kept in a dark room. The people coming to see the strange animal were invited to enter in the room one by one, touch the animal, come out and describe their "experiences." As there was darkness in the room, each person who entered the room tried to touch it by their hands, and tried to explain to those curiously waiting outside the room. During this demonstration, one person went in and tried to touch it by his hand. When he came out of the room, on enquiry, he told those inquisitive waiters, "This creature is like a water-pipe." The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan. Yet another person touched a foot of the animal, he said, "The animal looked like a pillar." Another laid his hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this animal was like a throne." All those who touched the animal started quarrelling about the truth of the experience of each one, claiming "the" truth for themselves and falsifying the truth claims of the others.

The curious spectators who came to experience the strange animal tried to know it by touching the animal by its different parts. The descriptions of all those who touched the animal gave different versions of the same animal, according to their own experiences. On account of their (diverse) experiences of the object, their statements differed. Each one thought he has seen "the right" description of the animal, and hence disagreed with the others, who described it differently. At the end, however, the Hindustanis asked the people to bring a lamp and then lit it in the dark room and asked people to enter the room and see the 'real' animal how it looked like. When the inquisitive people entered the room, now lit with the lamp, they were flabbergasted and dumfounded to see an awesome animal. They laughed at their own descriptions and their fights about those descriptions.

Interestingly, the parable is given with slight variations in many traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, and in modern literature. A detailed discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that the story of elephant and its experience of strangers amply demonstrate the inevitable result of the subjectivity of human experience of the physical or metaphysical beings. The constructivist experience makes us realize that even though there may be supposedly one reality but the experience of it is may be vastly different, due largely to subjective perceptions and experiences. Though each may be right in describing what they 'feel' but in the overall context, their descriptions fall short of describing "the truth."

Broadly, the story implies that one's subjective experience can be true, but such experience is inherently limited by its failure to account for other truths or experiences or a totality of truth. The sum total of parts is not the whole; the whole is much more integrated, dynamic, and wholesome. On the symbolic plane, the elephant may represent the reality or truth as it is huge and cannot be grasped in one go; the viewer may be seen as the seeker of the truth, the dark room as the absence of knowledge or ignorance, which is generally symbolized by darkness. Different viewers touching different parts of the elephant may symbolize partial grasp of the truth. The lamp enlightening the room and elephant may represent knowledge or enlightenment which makes things 'seeable'. By the symbol Rumi may mean that though in ignorance we might see many contradictions in life, but an enlightened 'Sheikh' or 'Pir' or "*Murshid*" in Sufi language may interpret these apparent contradictions in a way that resolves individual differences coherently. Rumi may imply by the story that people may have diversified experiences of the same reality, but their differences are there till they are confined to their own experience alone, without having a view of how others see the same thing or reality.

Let us read another story that again alludes to the diversity of our approach to pluralistic experiences of the human world, this time situated as it is, in a different human context that makes the plurality of 'meanings' sufficiently obvious as Rumi sees it.

### **The Story of Moses and Shepherd**

Once upon a time, Rumi so tells us, Prophet Moses saw a shepherd on the way, who was praying in his own 'language' saying, "O God, who chooseth as Thou wilt, where art Thou, that I may become Thy servant and sew Thy shoes and comb Thy head? That I may wash Thy clothes and kill Thy lice and bring milk to Thee, O worshipful One; That I may kiss Thy hand and rub Thy little feet and sweep Thy little room at bedtime."

On hearing these words, Moses was shocked (because his reference of praising God was non anthropomorphic and such praise could have meant for him blasphemous). Sternly, he asked the shepherd, "Man, to whom are you speaking?" He answered, "To Him who created us and brought this earth and heaven to sight." "Hark!" said Moses, "you are a very wicked man: indeed you are no true believer, you have become an infidel. What babble is this? What blasphemy and raving? Stuff some cotton into your mouth. The stench of your blasphemy hath made the whole world stink: your blasphemy hath torn the mantle of Religion to rags. Shoes and socks are fitting for you, but how are such things right for the Lord of glory?"

(Ismail, 1998, p. 34-36)

The shepherd said: O' Moses, you have shut my mouth and with remorse scorched my soul. He tore his clothes and heaved a sigh, turned to the desert and went his way. Moses, then comes home and receives a revelation from God, the story tells us. Rebuking Moses, God said, O' Moses,

You have parted my servant from me,  
Did you come to unite, or did you come to  
severe?  
Step not into severance, so far as you can.  
Of all the things the most loathsome to me is  
divorce.  
To each I have given a way of acting,  
To each a way of speaking,  
Among Hindus the idiom of Hind is right,  
and among Sindhis, Sindhi.

I look not to tongue and speech,  
Rather to the inward state.  
I look into the heart, whether it is humble,  
No matter if the words be un-humble.  
For the heart is the essence; speech an  
accident.  
Well then, the accident is secondary,  
the essence is the point.  
(Ismail, 1998, p. 36)

The story reflects three different roles: the role of the shepherd, the role of Moses, and finally, that of God. The shepherd represents a voice of a lowly simple person who is a lover of God; while Moses is shown as a stern, puritan and an uncompromising theologian, who reflects a unitary way of remembering God. God on the other hand, becomes a judge, who looks at the essence of things not just the words and external performance of deeds, but a discerning being. He (God) is shown here as a loving, caring and affectionate being, for whom substances, not forms, matter. Such a kind of God is more a fatherly and motherly figure, not so much a judge as Moses was trying to show. The theologian is warned of his role and the style with which to deal with God's creatures, and their multiple ways of expressing their religiosity. The story also tells us that separating humans from their each other, and their Lord, based on external forms, is abhorrent. God does not look at the peoples' language or their external forms but at their hearts as to how pure they are, not how eloquently they can articulate. This seems actually an allusion to a Hadith, a saying of Prophet Muhammad whereby he is reported to have said that God looks at neither peoples' faces nor their wealth, but to their hearts (for examining good deeds). Through the story, Rumi reflects the tension between a simple believer, with an unarticulated expression, and a theologian, with his mighty theological fist, each with their own language of communication.

These stories reflect multiple messages in terms of looking at human experience of the physical world and divine presence. First of all, they reflect a pluralistic attitude or values. The elephant story reflects a more constructivist epistemological stance that helps see the diversity of human experience of the object of knowledge. The story alerts us to the possibility of multiple experiences and their interpretations. Though we might be seeing the same world but our interpretations of it might be different as we experience it differently. As said earlier, we see things not as they really are, but as we are! Those who are unaware of these complexities insist on a unitary experience and one-dimensional expression of that experience, which in turn, lead to a lot of polemical clashes. The communal or sectarian clashes were as problematic in Rumi's time as today in our own times, so it seems.

Rumi, as we know, transcends sectarian affiliations and refuses to be limited to one way of looking at his faith. Unlike many who regard one sect as salvaged and others, as condemned, Rumi owns all. He makes it clear when he says,

*Millat wa adyan wa haftad wa du milat dar jahan*  
*Dar haqiqat nest illa milat wa adyan manam*  
 Religions or seventy-two sects in the world  
 In reality are nothing but *my* religions.  
 (Husain, 2005, p. 229)

According to many scholars, Rumi had no qualms with all Muslim sects (Schimmel, 2002; Nicolson, 2000). A story tells us that, a qadhi of the time, Sirajuddin, was very upset with Rumi for having all Muslim sects at par with each other. He sent a scholar (*'alim*) of the time to enquire from Rumi about this belief. He appeared in Rumi's presence, and among a couple of the people, asked him about his eclectic belief. Rumi answered in affirmative. Shocked as he was, the scholar became angry and started abusing Rumi by using a foul language. Rumi responded by saying, "I agree even with you as well." The scholar got embarrassed and left the place without arguing anymore.

Polemics among different religious adherents had led to the polarization of human society on faith basis. Because of the win-lose attitude in polemics, Rumi reportedly avoided polemical debates where there was a danger of hurting the other person by giving a sense of defeating them. It is said that once upon a time, there was a debate going on about the nature of the "*futuhati makkiyya*" of Ibn Arabi. The people were entangling with each other about the nature of the book. Suddenly, a qawwal, namely Zakki, came for Sama'. By cutting short the debate, Rumi said, "*Futuhati Zakki beh az futuhati Makki ast*" (Futuhati Zakki was better than the Futuhati Makki) and asked Zakki to start the sama' quickly. In this way, he stopped the endless and potentially a hurting debate (Husain, 2005).

It is reported that, among the students and followers of Rumi, there were not only students from different Muslim sects, but also from other religions. This is one more reason why people from across faiths participated in Rumi's funeral when he passed away. Even today, people from across languages, cultures, and following, regard Rumi as a great Sufi and his respect is omnipresent (Thackson, n.d.; Whinfield, 1973; Whinefield, n. d.).

What could be the sources of Rumi's spirit of religious pluralism? Most of his teachings could primarily be seen as reflecting the original sources of Islam being the Qur'an and Hadith or Traditions, though he might have been inspired by other sources as well. If we were to read the relevant Qur'anic verses and Rumi's religious pluralism, one would not fail to see the similarities. For example, the following verse – though there are many - demonstrate how the Qur'an sees the multiplicity of the faiths and how they are to be treated:

"...and if God had desired, He would have made you (*all*) a single community but that He might try you in what He hath given (to each of) you. Therefore, compete ye excellence one another in goodness; unto God is the return of you all, and then He shall declare unto you that wherein ye differed." (Qur'an 5: 48)

Even Prophet Muhammad is warned of not imposing his will on others as this verse clearly demonstrates:

"And if hath willed, thy Lord, verily all those who are in the earth would have believedu, all of them (together); wilt thou then compel people against their will to become believers? And (although) it is not for any soul to believe except by God's permission; while casteth He unseemliness (of infidelity) on those who use not (their) sense." (Qur'an 10: 99, 100) [Texts and translations from: <http://www.quranexplorer.com.qur>]

The Hadith literature also demonstrates the spirit of respecting God's creation, including all human beings, regardless of their faith. Compare it with a Hadith of the Prophet, in which he is reported to have said that the best among the human beings is the one who is the best in serving others (*khairun nasi mai yanfa' unnas*). Similarly, another Hadith goes even to the extent of regarding the *khalq* i.e., creation of God as "*'iyalullah*" (i.e., God's family). Summarily, the Hadith indicates that the *khalq* is God's family and whoever keeps this family happy is most loved by God.

Rumi believed, as did Ibn Arabi, in an all-encompassing acceptance of different points of view. Each nation or people conceive of the Real in its own way, which is demonstrated by many of Rumi's stories and poems.

Rumi was against hurting anybody as he believed that hurting the other means hurting yourself (Schimmel, 2002). In his prose work - *Fe ma fi*, he says,

If you speak well of another, the good will return to you. The good and praise you speak of another you speak in reality to yourself. ...If you accustom yourself to speak well of others, you are always in a "paradise". When you do a good deed for someone else you become a friend to him, and whenever he thinks of you he will think of you as a friend, and thinking of a friend is as restful as a flower garden. When you speak ill of someone else, you become detestable in his sight so that whenever he thinks of you he will imagine a snake or a scorpion, or thorns and thistles. (Translated by Thakson, n.d., p. 210)

Like Rumi, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), a great Sufi and thinker, also spoke of such universalistic ideas as can be seen from the oft quoted poem below:

My heart has become capable of every form: a meadow for gazelles, a monastery for monks, a house of idols, the Ka'ba for the pilgrims, Tablets of the Torah, the corpus of the Qur'an.	I follow the religion of love. Whee camels turn, there lies My religion, my faith. (Ismail, 1998, p. 28)
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Most Sufis harped on the philosophy of love as the panacea for human soul of all its ills.

Rumi has spread the message of love and acceptance to all, as reflected in his famous words: "Come! Whoever you are, come!" He further states that Rumi called "for the unity of hearts which transcends any other unity: Preaching the language of love." In Mathnawi, Rumi says:

To speak the same tongue brings affinity and induces kinship.  
A man with those he cannot converse is like a prisoner in chain.  
Oh! Many are those Indians and Turks who are foreigners but share the same tongue,  
And there are many pairs of Turks who are strangers to each other.  
The language of communication is good but it stands different and inferior.  
Because love, the language of the heart, is highly loftier and superior.

### **Rumi's Pluralism in the Context of Dialogue of Civilizations**

Today, pluralism is an extremely relevant theme for all human societies across the globe. One can see the debate about the issues of co-existence more particularly in the multi-cultural, multi-color, multi-ethnic, multi faith societies. Due mainly to interfacing of various communities, faiths, cultures and civilizations, interacting on a daily basis, issues of identities - communal, ethnic and cultural - have become a heightened priority for global agenda. After Huntington's (1996) warning that future battles would be fought on the frontlines of cultures and civilizations rather than based on politics, economics or any other ideology, a new rigor was given to the concept of what is called the dialogue of civilizations. Huntington thought that "the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations" (p. 28). Apparently, Huntington seems closer to what we see around today but at a deeper level, there may not be as much clash as it has been predicted. Cultures and civilizations continue to learn from each other despite certain international tensions that may be peripheral to civilizations than a systematic full blown clash. Huntington has been challenged on his conclusions (Naveed, 2006). Some argue that this clash may be "clash of ignorance" (Aga Khan, 2006; Esposito, 2010), because, more often than not, civilizations have lived together, learnt together and shared together a lot of things that are not always highlighted. Ihsanoglu, referred above, rightly points out that the history of Christianity and Islam, for example, has been closely bound up together because they originated from the same Abrahamic tradition and lived side by side in the same geographic location for centuries till today. Historically, Islam has demonstrated great tolerance to members of other faiths and communities such as in Spain, Iraq, India, the Holy Lands, Turkey, South East Europe, Africa and Indonesia and elsewhere. Even today, "from Egypt to Sudan to Malaysia and Indonesia, most Muslim countries are multifaith societies. Muslim diaspora across the world live as religious minority communities" (Esposito, 2010, p. 181). Anecdotes recounted in Christian-Muslim encounters should be sufficient to destroy the myth of Islam as a violent and militant religion. They also provide a paradigm for coexistence and collaborative action between the peoples of the two faiths.

Esposito lists a long range of countries and institutions that are now engaged with the dialogue of civilizations. He says that Christian and Muslim organizations, in countries with long established churches (e.g. Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia) increasingly turn to dialogues and exchange programs to promote mutual understanding and respect; universities in Egypt, Qatar, Lebanon, and Indonesia have newly instituted or expanded courses in comparative religions. On the other hand, in the United States, long established institutions such as Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for Muslim Christian Understanding are today joined by a seemingly endless number of new centers and international initiatives dedicated to promoting interreligious understanding (p.181). The Aga Khan has established a Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa, Canada wholly dedicated to the study of pluralism at the global scale.

These international and domestic initiatives in interreligious and intercivilizational dialogue are producing new ideas for actions. The explosion of literature and programs on dialogue of civilizations, particularly after 9/11 have simply exponentially increased (for example, my search in just one click in Google produced as many as 2,040,000 results about "dialogue of civilizations" and search on books on the same title 12,900,000 on November 30, 2015). This can give us a measure as to how much is being done with regard to dialogue of civilizations the world over. It therefore can be concluded that dialogue of civilizations is today a central theme for many governments, civil societies as well as academics and academia that give us reason to hope that better understanding will prevail once the ignorance on all sides is dispelled through meaningful education on pluralism in general and religious pluralism in particular.

In the context of the discourse of dialogue of civilizations and interreligious harmony, Rumi's stories related to religious pluralism provide a great inspiration as to how he, as early as 13<sup>th</sup> century, could talk about this issue in such a pedagogically appealing way. Indeed, today's dialogue idiom is much complex, but Rumi provides an inspiration to show how interreligious dialogue could be so sensitively handled. Though cultures may always have differences of expressions, however, Rumi's message of pluralism does have a role to play. Wars and fights have always been part of human societies, however, at the same time there have always been people across the globe who listened to saints like Rumi to preach the gospel of peace, love and fraternity, hoping that human folly will learn from the battles on the fault lines of human interests couched in lofty aims. Rumi's pluralism could become an antidote to the "clash" (of civilizations) if opinion makers in our societies listen to what Rumi has to say. Rumi would want us to build together what unites us, not what divides us. Echoing a similar voice, one of the outspoken dialogue-promoters and bridge builders of our times, the Aga Khan, the head of Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), working in many developing countries for peace and progress, shares this ideal and idealism of peace that there is enough that is shared among the monotheistic faiths that can bring us together. Responding to a question, in an interview in France, he remarked, "There are more elements which unite the three monotheistic religions of Abrahamic origin than which divide them. The important thing is to determine how these monotheistic religions can build on what unites them, and not to let themselves be divided by circumstances of daily life..." (April 8, 2003). The citation implies that today we need to develop institutions, programmes and activities that translate the ideal of human fraternity transcending narrow barriers of communalism; bringing people together and work for common causes to improve the quality of life of *all* humankind. We should do everything possible to avert these clashes of civilizations, if any, by promoting dialogue between and among cultures through, among other things, inspirational literature like that of Rumi and many others, that can work as catalyst to fuse together differing perspectives. Exemplary works, like that of Aga Khan (Global Centre for Pluralism), and many projects on interreligious programs, and projects can demonstrate how we need to revisit our ways of looking at our own traditions vis a vis other traditions, to develop mutually symbiotic relations and better global understanding.

### Summary

In this article, we looked at Rumi's ways of looking at religious diversity and why it is important to appreciate it. It became clear that Rumi was a strong believer in religious pluralism within, and by extension, beyond his own faith. His *hikayat*, metaphors, and parables allude to complexities of human condition in the world. He is among those who want to see the differences reconcilable, and enriching. Rumi's thought can inspire us to build bridges across faiths, nations, cultures and civilizations. Rumi's voice today can help us go into much more deeper divine wisdom of why we are different.

The historical divisions of sects or schools of thought cannot be wished away today; what needs to be done is to look at them as "communities of interpretations" rather than enemies of each other (Daftary, 1996).

Rumi's inclusive approach, his epistemological wisdom and ethical ideals can help build a more inclusive society. His thought can provide a stronger inspiration to build a more peaceful future where tolerance, respect and mutual acceptance characterize human relations, and celebration, not condemnation, of difference in whatever form.

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