

Jalaluddin Rumi's Religious Understanding: A Prelude to Dialogue in the Realm of Religious Thought

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In the course of human civilization, religion has underpinned the development of values of human respect, tolerance, peace, and the culture of peace. Unfortunately, at the same time, religion has also played the opposite role during some periods of history. Therefore, it is important to investigate how and to what extent religious faiths, or if I may say more accurately religious paradigms, have been and are ready to educate their believers in the above-mentioned value support system, and how they could set about so doing. How can religion provide us with an ambiance and a paradigm within which we can create an atmosphere of dialogue among different value systems? In this brief article, I try to seek light from the teachings of the great Persian thinker and poet, Jalaluddin Mowlavi Rumi, to be able to elaborate on this topic.

If we reduce religious thought to its theological *core*, then it is rather difficult to think of holding a genuine dialogue between religions, since a theological core of necessity includes dogmas. Can one hold any dialogue on dogmas? Although it seems that the realm of dogmas lies beyond the realm of dialogue, it is definitely possible to think of dialogue in the realm of religious *culture* or in the field of religious *civilization*. Religions, in their theological meaning, are divine entities, but what we consider as our religious culture is this worldly atmosphere which to some extent conducts and controls our behaviour.

Religion, which came to us by revelation, exists as a divine truth, as a divine entity independent of our perception, in the heavens, in the consciousness of God or however one may wish to describe it, but our understanding of religion – or rather of our religious world or paradigm – does not belong to, or does not necessarily manifest the realm of divinity and truth. It exists in the realm of our mind and our perception. It is a man-made earthly entity, although of course relatively inspired

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
0392-1921 [200311]50:4;127–134;039725

by what we have received from prophets, and that is the reason we can conduct dialogue concerning it.

Taking the concept of God as the core concept of religious belief in general, I would like to explain this point through an example. Suppose we ask a fish born in the sea, and which has been living there in the deep water, 'What is water?', an honest fish would reply: 'I don't know, what water is. What do you mean by that?', because it was born and grew up within it. The only way a fish can understand what water is, is for you to take it out of the sea, put it on the shore and say, 'Now, this is water', before replacing it. This is the only way a fish can understand what you mean by your question. Using this metaphor, we can say that God is the sea of existence without any shore, so we cannot take anyone out of this sea in order to be able to teach them what God is. We are embraced by this existential reality within which the main message of religion – at least of Islam, with which I am more familiar – is: we do not know. A god embraced by our knowledge is our creature, not our creator. And, in this sense, by claiming to have access to the absolute truth we are in fact referring to our man-made truth, which does not existentially and necessarily belong or relate to the realm of the sacred.

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Having said that, can we think that being religious will legitimize our claim to the truth? Can we claim that we are representatives of the truth, or, by being religious, are we promoting the claim that we do not know the truth? As the history of religious thought tells us – for example, in the case of Islam – a powerful and major interpretation suggests that we do not know the truth, that we are not the absolute owners of truth and cannot be so; we can be embraced by the truth and stay within its context, but cannot own it. We are embraced by God, but we cannot claim to possess Him. How can we represent Him? This is one interpretation of the message of religions during their history.

Let me provide an example of this attitude towards religious understanding in the course of history in my own country. I was born in a small town in north-central Iran near which – just 10 minutes drive away – in a village called Kharāqan, a very famous figure of Persian and Islamic mystical culture, Abul-Hasan Kharāqani, is buried. During my childhood, we used to be taken on pilgrimage to his tomb. Over the entrance to the mausoleum is inscribed a sentence, uttered by him 1000 years ago, noting that the place where he is buried was his house and that he was a renowned religious scholar and saint. The sentence reads: 'Give whoever comes into this house bread, and do not enquire about his faith, because whoever deserved existence from God definitely deserves bread from Abul-Hasan'.¹

In our primary school we also had in our Persian literature book a poem by the great Persian poet Jalaluddin Mowlavi Rumi, telling the story of a prophet who met a shepherd. In the narration of this story, Mowlanā certainly neither refers to a historical event nor to the prophet as a historical character; rather, he has chosen the context of the story to introduce his own ideas using the literary device of a dialogue between a prophet and a simple illiterate shepherd. Therefore, although he starts by

apparently quoting a prophet, he continues by exploiting the context of the story to include elements of his understanding of Islamic teachings, leaping from the course of the story to another concept and returning to it to provide himself with a new platform to elaborate upon the topic from a different angle. For him, as far as the essence of the divine message is concerned, the historical difference between all prophets thus disappears.

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The story relates that a prophet saw a shepherd on the way, who was saying: 'O God who chooses whom You will, where are You, that I may become Your servant and sew Your shoes and comb Your hair? That I may wash Your clothes and kill Your lice and bring milk to You; that I may kiss Your little hand and rub Your little foot, and when bedtime comes I may sweep Your little room, O You to whom all my goats are a sacrifice, O You in remembrance of whom are my cries of ay and ah!'

The shepherd whole-heartedly offered the best of what he possessed. His goats were everything to him; and the words ay and ah, although literally meaningless, were the sincere agents of his pure and strong sentiments. He was speaking foolish words in this way, contravening all permissible theological modes of addressing God, putting aside all theologically acceptable sets of divine attributes of God, and breaking all established clerical arrangements for understanding Almighty God. And the prophet, relying on his supposed position as the official grand-guardian of the theological domain of religion, and also considering himself the theological protector of religious faith, asked, 'Oh man, to whom is this addressed?' The shepherd simply answered in all honesty, 'To that One who created us; by whom this earth and sky were brought to sight.'

'Hark!' said the prophet, 'you have become very backsliding, totally depraved; indeed you have not only failed to become a believer, but moreover you have become an infidel. What babble is this? What blasphemy and raving? Stuff some cloth into your mouth! The stench of your blasphemy has made the whole world stink; your blasphemy has turned the silk robe of religion into rags. Shoes and socks are fitting for a lowly material creature like you, but how are such things right for the Almighty who is the Sun of Existence, the source of all existence? Do you not understand your limits? How do you dare to transgress your petty boundaries and extrapolate your sphere of needs to One who is superior to any need? Needs originate from Him; it is not He who is subject to any need. You understand nothing of Him; thus you do not even have the right to address Him. Then, if you do not stop your throat from uttering these words, a fire will come and burn up all the people. Oh, perhaps the fire has already come to you, otherwise what is this smoke coming out of you? Then it seems that your soul has already become black and your spirit rejected by God.'

'Do you not know that He embraces all creation? If you know this, how is it right for you to indulge in this doting talk and familiarity? Watch your limits; observe your level. You have brought fire upon yourself by these dangerous and rude excesses. You are really witless; and truly, the friendship of a witless man is enmity.'

You are indeed God's enemy, as you dare to totally disrespect His almighty presence by offering such rude services. To whom are you saying this? To your uncle or cousin? Are the body and its needs among the attributes of the Lord of glory? Do you not know that only one who grows drinks milk? Do you not know that only one who has feet needs shoes? Is not this understanding of Him a blasphemy? This talk of yours is foolish nonsense not only in regard to God, but even in regard to a chosen servant of His, it will cause the spirit to perish and darkens the heart. Do you not know that each word has its own fitting context? Do you not understand that, for us, having hands and feet is a gift for our benefit, and kissing and rubbing them are forms of praise in relation to us; but in relation to the holiness of God such terms are a pollution of His sacred realm? Rather, the appropriate words to Him are: "*He begat not, He was not begotten*",² as He is the creator of all begetters and all those who are begotten. The concept of birth is appropriate to everything that has been originated, but whatever is born on this side of the river of existence is of the world of becoming and decay and is contemptible: it is originated, and thus certainly requires an Originator . . . '.

According to Rumi's story, the prophet continued to overbearingly criticize and condemn the shepherd, preaching to him in complex theological and philosophical terms. The sincere shepherd, tearing his garment and heaving a sigh, said in shock with his simple and natural mode of expression, 'O, you have closed my mouth and you have burned my soul with repentance.' Then he hastily turned his head towards the desert and went on his way.

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The story narrates that, following this conversation, a revelation came to the prophet from God: 'You have parted My servant from Me. As a prophet, you came to unite, not to sever! So far as you can, do not become involved in separation: of all things the most hateful to Me is divorce [separation].³ I have bestowed on everyone a special way of acting: I have given to everyone a peculiar form of expression. In respect of him it is worthy of praise, and in respect of you it is worthy of blame: with regard to him honey, and with regard to you poison. I am independent of all purity and impurity, of all slothfulness and alacrity in worshipping Me. I did not ordain Divine worship that I might make any profit; no, but that I might do a kindness to My servants. In the Hindus the idiom of India is praiseworthy; in the Sindians the idiom of Sind is praiseworthy. I am not sanctified by their glorification of Me; it is they that become sanctified and pearl-scattering, pure and radiant. I look not at the tongue and the speech; I look at the inward spirit and the state of feeling. Light up a fire of love in your soul, burn thought and expression entirely away! O prophet, they that know the conventions are of one sort, they whose souls and spirits burn are of another sort.'

'To lovers there is a burning which consumes them at every moment. If he the lover speaks faultily, do not call him faulty, as the fault committed by him is better than a hundred right actions of another. Within the Ka'ba the rule of the *qibla* does not exist: what matter if the diver has no snow-shoes? Do not seek rational advice

from the drunken of love: why do you order those whose garments are torn in pieces to mend them? The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the only religion and creed is – God. If the ruby has not a seal graven on it, it is no harm: Love in the sea of sorrow is not sorrowful.'

It was after this conversation that, according to Rumi, God hid in the inmost heart of the prophet mysteries which cannot be spoken of. Words were poured upon his heart: vision and speech were mingled together. Rumi continues by saying that unfolding this tale further would be foolishness in him, because it would exceed our understanding and would uproot men's minds; and if he continued to write more about it, it would shatter many pens.

The story tells us that when the prophet heard these reproaches from God, he ran into the desert in quest of the shepherd. He pushed on over the footprints of the bewildered man, and he scattered dust from the skirt of the desert. At last he saw and overtook him; the giver of glad news said: 'Permission has come from God. Do not seek any rules or method of worship; say whatsoever your distressful heart desires. This [so-called] blasphemy of yours is the true religion, and your religion is the light of the spirit: you are saved, and through you a whole world is in salvation. O, you who are made secure by God do whatever He wants, go, loose your tongue without regard for what you say.'

The shepherd said, 'O prophet, I have passed beyond that: I am now bathed in my heart's blood. I have gone a hundred thousand years' journey on the other side. You whipped the lash, and my horse shied, made a bound, and passed beyond the sky. May the Divine Nature be intimate with my human nature . . .'.⁴

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This is a brief version of the story we read in our textbook when I was nine years old. Such an understanding of religion of course appeals for dialogue as in each dialogue we have to consider some cognizance of the truth for the 'other', as well as some contribution to it by the 'other', otherwise dialogue is meaningless.

Today, despite the existence of developed educational systems and great advances in communications and information technologies all over the world, millions of people remain trapped in the labyrinths of suspicion, mistrust and accumulated hatred, and still fail to appreciate how efficient the culture of dialogue can prove and how delightful creative diversity can be. We have now witnessed what scale of destruction this failure can bring about. The situation of the world reminds me of another tale cited by Rumi, *The Elephant and the Dark House*, which is also to be found in other forms, in Hindu and Buddhist stories and tales, and even in lands further east in various Asian cultures.

The story relates that an elephant was being exhibited in a dark house by some Hindus. In order to see it, many people were going into that darkness. As seeing it with the eye was impossible, each one tried to feel it in the dark with the palm of his hand. The hand of one fell on its trunk, he said: 'This creature is like a water-pipe'. The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan. Since another handled its leg, he said: 'I found the elephant's shape to be like a

pillar'. Another laid his hand on its back, he said: 'Truly, this elephant was like a throne.'

Similarly, whenever anyone heard a description of the elephant, he understood it only in respect of the part that he had touched. They started to contradict one another. Despite this total disagreement, they were not essentially enemies; rather, the real problem was that the elephant in its totality greatly exceeded the capacity of the palm, the sole instrument they relied upon to perceive it.

What is the solution? As long as the darkness remains, we cannot replace the problem with harmony and solidarity. Rumi suggests that 'If there had been a candle in each one's hand, the difference would have gone out of their words. The eye of sense-perception is only like the palm of the hand: the palm hath not power to reach the whole of him, the elephant. The eye of the Sea is one thing, and the foam another: leave the foam and look with the eye of the Sea. Day and night there is the movement of foam flecks from the Sea: you behold the foam, but not the sea. Marvellous! . . .

'We are dashing against each other, like boats: our eyes are darkened, though we are in clear water. O you that have gone to sleep in the body's boat, thou hast seen the water, but look on the Water of the water. The water has a Water that is driving it; the spirit hath a Spirit that is calling it.'⁵

How each religion and culture perceives the truth and the values which uphold its society is most precious for that culture and has an absolute sense within its confines. But that does not mean that the other parts of the elephant are unreal. In this age of global communication and interpenetration of religious and cultural ideas, it is essential to keep sight of the total anatomy of the elephant while remaining attached to the part we, as a particular culture, have experienced.

For Rumi, the more we are distant from the main core of religious faith, the more differences and controversies appear. The different directions of South, North, East and West appear only when we are distant from the Sun. To erase these diverse directions and concepts, we should move towards the Sun: 'We do not go towards the East and towards the West, rather we continuously travel towards the Sun'.⁶ 'The wing of that bird whose song brings joy is out of the East and the West.'⁷ This recalls a Quranic verse saying: 'And God's is the East and the West, therefore, whither you turn, thither is God's face'.⁸ It also reminds me of the fact that during the same period a promoter of colonialism in Europe, Rudyard Kipling, wrote in his poetry: 'Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'; another European poet, Goethe, in his *East-Western Divan*, penned the lines: 'To God belongs the Orient! To God belongs the Occident! Northern as well as southern lands rest in peace within his hands.'

For the great poet Goethe, East and West were not two distinct geographical regions, but rather two of the world's intellectual and cultural poles; in order to understand the one, it is necessary to understand the other. This is not to merely satisfy one's curiosity about the other culture, but rather a necessity our future path depends on.

To seek the central core of religious teachings and to avoid being lost in the divergent orientations created by the complexity of theological and jurisprudential discussions, Rumi encourages us, as we have seen in his example in the above story, to

eliminate the divergence of directions and run towards the Sun, towards the Ka'ba, as 'within the Ka'ba the rule of the *qibla* does not exist'.⁹ We know that Muslims say their daily prayers while they are oriented towards the Ka'ba, *qibla*, and therefore if a Muslim is inside the Ka'ba itself there is no need to choose a specific direction. Being inside the Ka'ba, the notion of 'towards the Ka'ba' is meaningless. For Rumi the 'art of listening' is the prerequisite of success in hearing the voice of the universe as a whole, which is the transcendental goal of religion.¹⁰

To perform the art of listening, which in turn should conclude in the art of thinking, openness is required by its very nature. It is by performing the art of listening, especially when we come into the realm of our beliefs and value systems, that we may find new layers of meaning in the domain of our values. This will introduce an evolution in our paradigm of understanding which could even transform our supposed contradictory orientations into a harmonized manifestation of a cluster understanding, a harmonized package of values and beliefs rather than a set of separated elements of faith.

We can clearly find strong encouragement in religious teachings to learn the art of listening and the art of thinking, as can be seen in an example from the Holy Quran: 'Give good news to those servants of Mine who listen to sayings and follow the best; indeed those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the owners of knowledge'.¹¹ Another Quranic verse states that the people who will receive punishment on the Day of Judgment shall say: 'Had we but listened or pondered, we should not have been among the inmates of the burning fire'.¹²

Through the art of listening we can cross the gaps which are created only by our illusions which, in turn, are mainly created through our ignorance of each other's language of understanding and of living: 'Ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of the suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into wars'.¹³

Rumi does not accept that the 'art of listening' relies merely on the understanding of the other's speech and tongue; rather, he invites us to listen to each other's hearts:

To speak the same tongue is a kinship and affinity: a man, when he is with those in whom he cannot confide, is like a prisoner in chains. Oh, many are the Indians and Turks that speak the same tongue, oh, many the pair of Turks that are as strangers to each other. Therefore the tongue of mutual understanding is different indeed: to be one in heart is better than to be one in tongue. Without speech and without sign or scroll, hundreds of thousands of interpreters arise from the heart.¹⁴

He decides to throw word and sound and speech into the realm of confusion, that without these three he may converse with his beloved, indeed, with the universe.¹⁵ He finds true individuality in non-individuality: therefore, he moves his individuality into non-individuality.¹⁶

Rumi hates walls and loves deserts as they are free from boundaries. He teaches us that 'the unique light of the sun in the sky becomes a hundred lights in the courtyards. But when walls are removed there will be no light but one'.¹⁷

I would like to end this very brief introduction to Rumi's understanding of his religion, Islam, with this impression of him:

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I will meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, and even the phrase 'each other' no longer make any sense.

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Notes

1. See the preamble of Abul-Hasan Kharaqani, *Noor al-uloom*, edited by Abd Al-Rafie Haqiqat, Offset Publishers, Tehran, 1984; see also Bastani Parizi, *Hemaseh-ye Kavir*, p. 404.
2. The third verse of Chapter 112 of the Holy Quran.
3. This sentence refers to a *hadith* of the Prophet which states: 'The thing that I love most of all that God created on this earth is granting a slave freedom, and the thing that I hate most of all that God created on this earth is divorce'.
4. Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnavi Manavi*, Second Book, pp. 105–7, Kolaleh-Khavar (Ramezani) edition, Padideh Publishers, Tehran, 1987.
5. *Mathnavi Manavi*, Third Book, p.157.
6. Jalaluddin Rumi, *Divan Kabir Shams*.
7. *Mathnavi Manavi*, Second Book, p.136
8. The Holy Quran, chapter al-Baqarah, verse 115.
9. Abul-Hasan Kharaqani, 1984, *op. cit.*
10. See, for example, *Mathnavi Manavi*, Second Book, p. 34, line 32; Fifth Book, p. 313, line 17.
11. The Holy Quran, chapter Zumar, verse 39.
12. The Holy Quran, chapter Al-Mulk, verse 10.
13. Preamble of the Constitution of UNESCO adopted in London on 16 November 1945.
14. *Mathnavi Manavi*, First Book, p. 26, lines 35–7.
15. *Ibid.*, First Book, p. 36, line 24.
16. *Ibid.*, First Book, p. 36, line 26.
17. *Ibid.*, Fourth Book, p. 223, lines 7–8.