Poetry and mysticism in Islam

The heritage of Rūmī

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Introduction

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The tension between mystical and legalistic tendencies – present in all Abrahamic religious traditions – is nowhere more pronounced than in Islamic history. Mysticism as a variety of religious experience in Islam has commonly come to be known as Sufism. The figure of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Balkhi, known as Rūmī (1207–1273) towers above the mystics of Islam as a Sufi master whose life and works are the validation of a unique paradox. He was at once a most ecstatically uninhibited lover of the Divine, and a zealous upholder of the Law. It is not merely the profundity of his exposition of the mystic worldview that distinguishes him among a vast and brilliant constellation of Sufi masters, but the volcanic creativity of infinite imagination, the prodigious complexity of his personality and his encounter with life and society of his time – at once sublimely detached and passionately involved.

A man who gave refuge to the homeless, and whose company was sought by the royalty. A magnetic force in the process of Islamization of Asia Minor and yet a man who was deeply loved and, at his death, sincerely mourned by Jews, Greeks, and Armenians alike. A sober judge and expounder of the Holy Law and Doctrine who instituted nocturnal seances of dance and music among his devotees. A man of acute aesthetic sensitivity who even designed the distinctive flowing robe and tall headgear of his circles of dervishes. A supreme creator and manipulator of sign and symbol in an integrated life of infinite variety and singular purpose. This is the legacy left to us by Rūmī.

No part of this legacy is more relevant to our time than Rūmī's frequent assertions that all religions and revelations are only the rays of a single Sun of Reality; that all prophets have only delivered – albeit in different tongues – the same principles of eternal goodness and eternal truth. The ultimate goal of humanity, according to

Rūmī, is union with God through love. Virtue, as he conceives it, is not an end but a means to that end. Thus his poetry is based on a transcendental idea of unity which he works out from the moral, not the metaphysical, standpoint. It is the primacy and the power of love as the animating motive of that moral view, which gives Rūmī's Sufism an affirmative ultimate view of the human predicament.

As modern man experiences with growing bitterness and deepening anguish the fragmentation of his own being and his alienation from all that surrounds him, the seeming wholeness of another era beckons to him with increasing allure. Yet as the history of Sufism illustrates, the line between self-knowledge and self-delusion is very thin and elusive. The fundamental difference between a "God-intoxicated" Sufi like Rūmī and some Sufi-enamored representatives of our generation is that while Rūmī strove to "annihilate" his "self," others assert theirs. We note also the large number of Sufis who traveled the circular path to selflessness and arrived at self-indulgence. It was the focus upon the primacy of the spiritual dimension in man which enabled the Sufis to overcome their sense of separation with exuberant joy. The possibility of recapturing our spiritual potential reenters into the vision of our time and it depends upon awareness of ourselves.