

## BOOK NOTE

**Mostafa Vaziri. *Rumi and Shams' Silent rebellion: Parallels with Vedanta, Buddhism and Shaivism***

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Islam may be a world religion like Christianity, but its relation with philosophy as a project of critical understanding is far less obvious and documented. However, the medieval Islamic civilization of the Middle East and Southern Spain has produced several prominent philosophers. And Islam also had and still has a mystical branch called Sufism, even as this finds itself at odds with more radical, orthodox interpretations of the religion, due to its bold and often controversial statements. While 11th century author Al-Ghazzali is widely known in philosophical circles—not to the least because of his criticism of philosophy and its comprehensive ambitions—the poet Rumi and his master Shams are less well known, which is regrettable as the book of Vaziri demonstrates, that is, if Rumi is to be considered as a Sufi mystic and poet after all! The approach of Vaziri—who, besides a thorough knowledge of textual sources also has a background as a volunteer medical doctor—aims to challenge this “classical” interpretation and shed light instead on Rumi’s philosophical and universalist tendencies. He is supporting his claims by a new reading of Rumi’s own “poetry” (especially the *Divan*), as well as of the “Discourses” (*Maqalat*) by his master Shams. Rumi’s earlier work—in particular the *Masnavi*—may have been more Sufi-oriented, but his encounter with Shams, of which relatively few things are known with certainty, in spite of the existence of plenty of unverified “anecdotes,” brought him into a state of crisis and made him change his stance from that of a Sufi scholastic towards that of a rebellious philosopher.

The traditional understanding of Rumi—a Persian, born in the 13th century in present-day Afghanistan—is based on non-authoritative sources, and must be understood from the attempt by the early Ottoman emirate to “classify” Rumi’s work in the predominant mystical Sufi culture of those times, in order not to upset its spiritual and political agenda. Likewise, Rumi has not “founded” any particular philosophical school, even as he is considered in the traditional view as the founding “father” of the *Mevlevi* Sufi movement. Indeed, founding an order would have brought the risk of Rumi falling into dogmatism, hence, dualism, something he abhorred. However, the *Mevlevi* order only began its history more than twenty years after Rumi’s death, being founded by the poet’s grandson, making its presumed foundation by the poet himself an anachronism, still according to Vaziri. It may have been a blessing for posterity, however, that the *Mevlevi* has managed somehow to keep the unorthodox works of Shams and Rumi secret. In fact, until the 1920’s—when the *Mevlevi* order was suspended and forbidden—the *Divan* and *Maqalat* had remained hardly known outside the Ottoman

territory. The fact that they were not earlier destroyed like works by other authors for being “heretic” is considered as a miracle by Vaziri.

One of Rumi’s most basic philosophical positions is called by Vaziri “non-dualism.” If reality is “non-dual” it is not because the world would not be multifaceted or “plural” in its ways of appearing. It is rather in the way those many manifestations are reporting to each other, that unity is lighting up. The plurality and multiplicity in the world is related to a non-plural, non-multiple, therefore also non-dual source. Standing above all oppositions—like those between day and night, man and woman, body and soul, Creator and creation, good and evil, and—especially, believer and non-believer—the world is characterized by “oneness.” Such consciousness is inclusive and “non-rejectionist,” as it does not attempt to annihilate what does not fit in the classical “ideal” spiritualist discourse, but on the contrary integrates it in the comprehensive “vision” of a greater world. In fact, most established religions and sects tend to be exclusivist and dualistic, and have a tendency to reject or deny darkness, evil, pain, and disbelief. The fact that Rumi distances himself from mainstream Islam suggests possibilities to read him from a comparative or transcultural perspective on religion. Vaziri does not fail to repeat this several times throughout the book, with examples, especially in Chapters 6A and 6B, from Vedanta and Buddhism, and from Kashmir Shaivism and Tantra practices, respectively. He also challenges the argument that Rumi’s production of poetry would make him unfit to be considered as a full-blown philosopher. Referring to poetic elements in the *Tao te ching*, the *Dhamapada*, the *Upanishads* and even the *Koran*—he could also have added the *Bible*—Vaziri points at the usual appearance of poetic formations in the expression and dissemination of wisdom. On the other hand, philosophical undertones are also clearly present in the works of other Persian poets as Hafiz and Omar Khayyam.

If Rumi has chosen poetic verses as channel for his thoughts, it is probably because doing so grants him a literary license to challenge established cultural and metaphysical beliefs or practices. Just as Al Farabi did not make a distinction between theory and praxis, Rumi did not distinguish philosophy from mysticism. Oppositions or contradictions are aspects of dualism which is foreign to Rumi’s way of thinking. His use of religious terms should not be used to consider him as an exclusively religious author, as religious terms are often used as metaphors. The author gives the example of the term *mi’raj*, that literally refers to the Prophet’s nocturnal journey on a winged horse to Heaven, accompanied by an angel. Following Rumi, Vaziri recommends instead to read it as a spiritual journey towards the highest level of understanding, to get a glimpse of ultimate reality. Likewise, the pilgrimage to Mecca and the *Ka’ba* is not important from an external or ritual point of view; Rumi advises his listeners to turn their hearts into a spiritual *Ka’ba*, and perform the ritual circumambulation as a dance. In spite of his critique of ritualism, Rumi expressed his reverence for Mohammad and other spiritual guides. He sees the prophet as a seeker of Ultimate Reality, aiming at the establishment of a non-worldly kingdom, quite different from dogmatic Islam that came after him. Rumi’s master Shams already had vehemently rejected the distinction between believers (*mu’min*) and non-believers, (*kafir*), considering this as the result of a perverted interpretation of prophetic teaching. While prophets are believed to have had genuine personal mystical experiences of “Love,” the Ultimate Reality, their main intention was

to help people to achieve their own. However, ignorant people turned their words into dogma, that would become the basis for the legalistic classification of people according to their degree of compliance with the directives of the faith. The point of Shams, which foretells some of Rumi's views, was that exegesis of foundational texts should lead to devotion and that meditating is better than preaching, since the latter can trap the preacher in dogmatic dualism.

The religion that Rumi was recommending is the *Mazhab-e 'Ishq* or "Religion of Love." Love is perhaps the most important concept in Rumi's thought—as far as the term "concept" is appropriate here. It is in love that the world and its consciousness are united, as the integration of the knower, the knowing, and the known. From this unity of "Love," all dualism, pluralism, causality, etc., have come forth. Love is like an impersonal God, with seat in the heart, and only accessible through solitude and utter silence. This position appears to match some Sufi beliefs. In fact, Sufism, being a controversial trend in Islam, too, considers God and existence as one principle. At least, this is what transpires from Ibn 'Arabi's *Wahdat-ul-wujud* metaphysics. Vaziri supports, however, that neither Rumi nor his master Shams were impressed with this element of Sufi-doctrine. Sufism also appears to have been dedicated to *shari'a*, or Islamic law, going against the freedom advocated by Shams, who appears to have "shaken" Rumi from his Sufi-scholastic slumber sometime in his life. Chapter 3 in the book zooms in on the master of Rumi, who was probably influenced by the *Qalandari* movement, a group of ascetic outliers who were not afraid of making shocking statements or behaving in a way that was likely to provoke mainstream Muslims, such as shaving their entire head and face—Sufis and mainstream Muslims used to wear beards as in the prophetic tradition—wearing animal skins and earrings, drinking wine, even visiting brothels. Shams, a wanderer surnamed "the bird," challenging the excesses of religious fanaticism and ritualism, stated that it is enlightenment—based upon the training of the mind or taming of the *Ego*—that is important, according to Shams and to Rumi as well. In this sense, not only the attachment to explicit religious doctrine, but also the primacy of the human body is to be overcome. This can happen through a prolonged and meditative use of music and dance (*sama'*), practices that go against established Muslim tradition, but were experienced as very effective, actually even a type of "yoga." The *Shems Tebrizi* order—largely operating in the shadow of the *Mevlevi*, perhaps since Rumi's grandson was said to be associated to both—claimed Shams as their spiritual guide and took over some elements of his lifestyle.

Chapter 4 brings the focus back to Rumi, offering a deconstruction of assumed anachronisms in the early biographies of the master, particularly in those by Sepahsalar and by Aflaki, who were members of the *Mevlevi* Sufi order. Vazari repeatedly stresses the unfounded, biased, exaggerated, and romanticized accounts of Rumi's life, of his relation with Shams and son Sultan Valad. The very classification of Rumi as a Sufi and even as a Muslim is once more questioned by the author, in spite of the master's birth in a Muslim family and community. His major "pre-Shams influenced" work is the *Masnavi*, a rather didactic poetic work, which contains not only a long list of Koranic stories and prophetic *hadiths*, but also Indian (Buddhist) and other Persian tales, as well as elements of Judaic monotheism and of Greek and Arabic philosophy. The poetic verses of the *Divan* are clearly inspired by Rumi's encounter with Shams, while the *Fi hi ma fihi*—the

collection of his utterances—reflects some of Rumi’s “post-Shams” experiences and thoughts, primarily focused on Love as the ultimate Reality.

In Chapter 5, Vaziri aims to offer a more systematic presentation of Rumi’s inner world of thought. He is doing so in two steps; in the first, he gives the reader an idea of Rumi’s pyramid-structured philosophical understanding of reality. In the second, he zooms in on Rumi’s rejection of dualism in many levels, as referred to earlier. A four-level pyramid as structure for Rumi’s philosophy reveals Love as the top, above all dualism. Then follows the way to understand this immortal and ultimate reality. The third level presents the challenges in every attempt to understand that ultimate reality, particularly the dualities and related distractions that prevent true understanding. In the fourth level are the worldly human affairs, that may become lessons on the way to awakening. Rumi’s poetry, then, is meant to become a guiding force, a vibrant stimulation of consciousness, to transcend the repetitive and transitory cycle of worldly life and ascend towards “Love.”

That Rumi and Shams have undergone a wide range of influences, also from outside their own Persian culture, has been repeatedly mentioned, and even explicitly demonstrated in Chapters 6A and 6B as earlier stated. The influence in Islamic mysticism of Kashmir Shaivism and Tantric elements, some of which were integrated in Āivite and Buddhist circles, is taken up again in a “post-conclusion” appendix, for the purpose of recommending further research on that matter. End notes, a most useful glossary of terms, an index and a bibliography are offered after the appendix, so this interesting eye-opening book reveals all features of a scientifically sound study. May the wish of the author—which is to give Rumi and the whole of Oriental thinking the place they deserve in contemporary philosophical studies—become true and may Rumi’s challenge of dogmatism and preconceptions also be taken seriously by scholars in philosophy and theology, both in the East and in the West!

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