

## The Continuity of pre-Islamic Thought in Iran as Evident in Rumi

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Molana Jalal el-Din Rumi (1207-1273 AD) is the greatest poetic philosopher of Iran. His two monumental works, the *Masnavi* and *Divan-e Shams*, stand on a par with the timeless epic of Ferdowsy. Yet, compared to Ferdowsy, Khayyam or Hafez, Molana Rumi displays far less direct knowledge of Zoroastrianism. Indeed, in one of his celebrated poems in the Mathnavi illustrating his point about *free will* over one's actions by those who pick fruit from private orchards, he extolls the quality of free will, so important in Zoroastrianism, but displays a lack of knowledge of that as being a core part of Zoroastrianism. As scholars of religion such as R.C. Zaehner of Oxford University have noted, "Zoroastrianism is the religion of free will *par excellence*"<sup>i</sup>.

Unlike most other poets (except Zoroaster himself), Rumi places woman on an equal footing with or higher than man. Let us consider the belief of the state of love and marriage being comprised of two bodies and one soul. That is the male and female spiritual qualities, having come down, been embodied in two separate bodies, now conjoined in a merger of love making a whole and near perfect union. Rumi emphasizes the feminine in the godhead, manifested in the human being as part of the now completed whole, and does so as much or more than the masculine which is often by default the focus in much of the poetry of other great poets. By default, because the great poets having nearly all been men, their poetry, on issues that we may see as gender-specific, at least subconsciously was an expression from the male counterpart of the human being.

The pre-Islamic beliefs that we note in Rumi, therefore, may be traceable to Mithraism rather than Zoroastrianism. The Modern Persian word for love, *mehr* and its many derivations which include those in given names or place names derive from *Mithra*. The religion, or as some have characterized it due to lack of a prophet and established scriptures, cult, of Mithraism spread from Iran to the West through the Roman Empire as the faith of under-privileged classes in society, many of whom were suffering from economic and social injustice. It promoted the concept of brotherly/sisterly love as a state of existence to obviate disputes and inequalities, and when they occurred, to resolve and settle them with a spirit of love, as opposed to ego associated with material or political interest. Mithraists carried these beliefs and their celebration of the birth of Mithra (the sun) as Christmas, into Christianity when they accepted the compromise to become Christians. Perhaps for such reasons Rumi's poetry has been seen by some critics to have a Christian quality to it. Some theologians such as James Freeman Clarke<sup>ii</sup> of Harvard Divinity School have asserted that Jesus stresses the feminine in the human being. Yet, with the council of Nicea ca. 325 AD and the Church Fathers, the emphasis in Christianity became more masculine.

Rumi's message in his ode below, as with so many of his odes, for the listener is the dissolution of the *ego in love*, and attainment of the state of *love* during our existence, as opposed to the day-to-day *calculating* self. His message is to free oneself and accept the call that the soul makes. Rumi calls for the human being to let his ego, his selfishness, die. "Have no fear of such death, that raises one's state from the base earth, materialism, to Heaven. Until then the confines of the self are as shackles, and humans are its captives . . . Those who thus *die* before this *Majestic Beauty*, free themselves to be princes and kings. Those who break out of this, their daily prison, rise to real majesty . . . Those who achieve this dissolution of their conscious calculating self in love appear as the full moon shining through the clouds."

The term *nafs* that Rumi refers to below is an autonomous faculty in the spiritual makeup of the human being. It is not so much a faculty of the mind that is cultivated, but a

component of the nature of the human being that ought to be brought under control by the faculties of the mind.

در این عشق چو مردید همه روح پذیرید	بمیرید بمیرید در این عشق بمیرید
کز این خاک برآید سماوات بگیرید	بمیرید بمیرید وزین مرگ مترسید
که این نفس چو بندست و شما همچو اسیرید	بمیرید بمیرید وزین نفس ببرید
چو زندان بشکستید همه شاه و امیرید	یکی تیشه بگیرید پی حفره زندان
بر شاه چو مردید همه شاه و شهیرید	بمیرید بمیرید به پیش شه زیبا
چو زین ابر برآید همه بدر منیرید	بمیرید بمیرید وزین ابر برآید
هم از زندگی است اینک ز خاموش نغیرید	خموشید خموشید خموشی دم مرگست

### Rendition to English

May we die, may we die, in this love may we die  
For once we die, then we may embody the soul

Let us die, let us die, have no fear of this death  
For it will raise us from the base earth to high heavens

Let us die, let us die, that we may sever from this *nafs*  
For this *nafs* is but a prison in which we are bound

Take a pick axe to the walls of this prison  
Once broken, you are princes and kings

Let us die, let us die, before the *Majestic Beauty*  
For once we die, we become kings and famous

Let us die, let us die, and leave this cloud covering us  
For once we die we shine like the full moon, through the clouds

Let it [*nafs*] be mute and mute, its death imminent  
It shall then let you hear the sound of life

Rumi's core message in the ode cited, also expressed via different themes throughout his *Divan-e Shams* : The real fear we should have is not of dying, but of not getting to know, and entering, the state of *love* while living. Without it, in effect the humanity in us is dead while we are bodily alive. The state of *love* embodies but is more than that found in romance between a man and woman. It is a condition that would have one genuinely going about his day and dealing with fellow human beings with love, rather than out of material or political interest in continuous power struggles. Besides the concept of annihilation of the conscious self in *love*, Rumi's concept of *Majestic Beauty* refers to what is the quality of feminine in the godhead. *Beauty* has rarely if at all, been emphasized as a quality of or in connection with the majesty of kings. Manifested in human beings, it is not feminine physical beauty Rumi is referring to, but the inner beauty that the female counterpart of the human being is endowed with by the Higher Being.

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### References

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<sup>i</sup> Zaehner, R. C., *At Sundry Times: An Essay in the Comparison of Religions*, 1958, pp. 142-43.

<sup>ii</sup> Clarke, James Freeman, *Ten Great Religions*, 1887.