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June 19, 2014

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RELIGION

Rumi and the Ocean of God's Love

Rumi is justly celebrated as one of the great poets of human history. When I started reading him as an undergraduate 45 years ago, I did not know Persian and relied on the work of R. A. Nicholson, who produced the first critical edition of Rumi's 25,000-verse *Mathnawi* along with a complete English translation and two volumes of commentary (eight volumes in all). At that time Rumi was practically unknown outside the field of Middle East studies, so his popularity in the West is a recent phenomenon. In the Persianate world (which extends from the Balkans through Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent), he has been a cultural icon for centuries. Although he is now far better known in the West than he was 40 years ago, the understanding of what he is actually talking about seems to have decreased. It was not easy to plow through Nicholson, but one did learn a great deal about the religious and philosophical content of Rumi's teachings. Having breezed through one of the popular selections, one comes out feeling good.

Everyone recognizes that Rumi was a poet of love. This means that most people see him as an oddity in Islamic history. When we situate him in his own historical context, however, we see that he spoke for the mainstream. What made him stand out was that he got to the heart of the matter more quickly and much more enticingly than most authors. He makes his agenda explicit in the introduction to the *Mathnawi*: He is explaining "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion," that is, the Islamic religion founded by the Koran and Muhammad.

Like any great scripture, the Koran presents its teachings in mythic and symbolic language susceptible to a great range of interpretation. Although the Koran does not mention love that often (about 100 times), it is easy to see that these few mentions provide the germs for an extensive literature on the intimate links between God and the human soul. In these discussions, authors sometimes cite what are said to be words of God addressed to David the Psalmist. In a typical snippet, God says, "O David, anyone who claims to love Me is a liar if night comes and he goes to sleep on Me. Does not every lover love to be secluded with his beloved?" One of these purported conversations eventually became prominent in Sufi teachings. David asked God why he created the universe. God replied, "I was a hidden treasure and I *loved* to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized."

This saying puts centuries of reflection on love into a nutshell. It means that God in his absolute unity is infinitely rich, boundlessly overflowing, merciful, compassionate, loving. Moreover, "God is beautiful," as the Prophet said, "and he loves beauty." When he loves, it is always beauty that he loves. In his eternal selfhood, that beauty is precisely the Hidden Treasure, for there is no other beauty. His infinite love for beauty then gave rise to the universe, which is defined most briefly as "everything other than God." He filled that universe with beauty so that others might share in the joy of love.

But mountains and oceans, lions and eagles, no matter how beautiful they may be, have little or no capacity to recognize beauty in others. What is needed is a boundless receptivity to the infinite beauty of the Hidden Treasure, and that is what God gave to human beings when he created them "in His form," as Muhammad said, echoing Genesis. The Koran says, "He formed you, and He made your forms beautiful" (40:64). God loves human beings because of the fullness of the divine beauty that they display and their resultant ability to recognize God's beauty. God then asks, as any lover would, that they love him in return.

The human role in the universe is to recognize God, to love him as he should be loved, and to bring his love and beauty into the world. This anthropology underlies much of Islamic thought and is made explicit by Rumi's poetry. Its ongoing relevance becomes a little more obvious when we recall that in Islamic theology, God did not create the universe way back when, only to tinker with it once in a while (the notion of Deism). On the contrary, he is always creating the universe, which is nothing but the ongoing, ever-changing sparkle of the Hidden Treasure. God's love to be recognized is never absent from the world and our lives, and it constantly instills energy into all things.

Rumi gave a great variety of names to the human participation in God's love -- hunger, thirst, need, desire, craving, passion, fire, burning. Like many others, he identified love with the "poverty" mentioned in the Koranic verse, "O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the rich, the praiseworthy" (35:15). Love is that empty spot in our hearts that we can never fill, because it craves the infinite riches of the Hidden Treasure.

Once upon a time, Rumi says, we were fish swimming in the ocean, unaware of the water and ourselves. The ocean wanted to be recognized, so it threw us up on dry land. We flip after this, we flop after that, pursuing an ever more elusive happiness. Is the ocean tormenting us? Well, yes. It put us here. But, the more we burn, the more intensely we will love the ocean's beauty when it calls us back.

For the story of the fish, see Chittick, Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi, pp. 70-71.