

R. de Groot

Prof. Rokus de Groot,
Musicology, Faculty of
Humanities, University of
Amsterdam.
E-mail: rokus.dg@gmail.com,
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4324-8236>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Supp33.6>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2022

Supp 33:59-72

Date received:

05 January 2022

Date accepted:

16 March 2022

Date published:

20 June 2022

A lesson in love: Farid al-Din Attar's story of Sheikh San'an and the Christian girl¹

ABSTRACT

This article interprets the story of Sheikh San'an and the Christian girl from Attar's The conference of the birds as a special case of interfaith love. The sheikh's surprise meeting with the girl leads him to the painful insight that, although he is an accomplished and highly respected scholar, he does not know true love. Only with the help of outrageous means of humiliation, inflicted upon him by a girl of another faith, including the rejection of his own religion as he knows it, is he able to bring his path to perfection. The meeting between the sheikh and the Christian girl may be compared with the encounter between Rumi and Shamsoddin of Tabriz, in the sense that both are transformed by shock from an eminent scholar into a true lover of the divine.

1. INTRODUCTION

How is it possible that the most respected Muslim spiritual leader of his day, sheikh San'an, fell at first sight for the charms of a Christian girl, and eventually gave up his faith for her? How could decades of fasting and other austerities, prayer, study, pilgrimage, the observation of sacred laws, keeping Mecca's holy place, not have protected him from this? How could he not have responded to the shock which his



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



1 This article is dedicated to Kees Waaijman in deep gratitude and admiration for his eminent scholarship and wisdom. This interpretation also pays attention to the plight of the Christian girl. She, too, goes through a transformation, from a condescending teaser to a lover of truth.

outrageous conduct caused to those who were dependent on him for their spiritual development, first of all his disciples?

Farid al-Din Attar (ca. 1145-1220) relates the story of Sheikh San'an and the Christian Girl in his *Mantiq at-Tayr* (*The conference of the birds*). It is an allegorical text about the Sufi's quest for God, in the guise of an avian pilgrimage in search of their King Simorgh, through seven valleys of trial. The poet brings home to the reader the overwhelming enchantment by the Christian girl in a graphic way. He praises the spiritual qualities of the sheikh in seven double verses, while he devotes up to 18 such verses to the beauty of the girl. Obviously, this is not a fair match. Indeed, how could the sheikh have resisted her charm?

Was it simply a common case of a man of considerable spiritual achievement, who as yet had neither arrived at, nor integrated into his way towards liberation, insight into the nature of physical attraction, and who was still subject to being bound by that attraction, and, by consequence, to binding others? Is it another example of a religious teacher tending towards sexual transgression, of which we hear so often in the news nowadays from within various spiritual denominations?

2. A TROUBLING DREAM

It does not seem to be as simple as that. Attar explains to us that the case is not a banal matter of an old man craving sex. It is only *later* in the story that the girl appears on the scene. First the sheikh has a dream. A very troubling one. Not once, but many times. Darbandi and Davis translate the relevant verses as follows:²

A strange dream troubled him, night after night;
Mecca was left behind; he lived in Rome [Rum, Byzantium],
The temple where he worshipped was his home,
And to an idol he bowed down his head.

In line with the didactic nature of Attar's text, we may take this dream as divine guidance, a message from within, or from beyond. In fact, instruction-by-dream was a recognised way of transmission in Sufism. For example, Rumi holds that Attar himself was instructed by dream to follow the Sufi path, in his case by the martyr-saint Mansur al-Hallaj.³ This is indeed how the sheikh conceives it. He is courageous enough not to

2 Their translation will be used throughout this article (Attar 2011). The story of sheikh San'an and the Christian girl is given on pp. 68-86.

3 See Attar (2011:xiii).

neglect this dream, and to investigate its significance thoroughly. The sheikh realises that, however accomplished he may be, he has not yet walked the way to its end:

But every man meets problems on the Way,
And I shall conquer if I watch and pray.
If I can shift this rock my path is clear;
If not, then I must wait and suffer here.

Without knowing what awaits him, he decides to go to Rum. His disciples follow him on his quest. At the very moment he enters that city, the first one his eyes fall on is a Christian girl of untold beauty. Immediately he is smitten with her.

3. THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY IN *THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS*

Attar must have viewed the story of sheikh San'an and the Christian girl as of the highest importance. This may be gleaned from the way in which he treats and situates it in his text. It is by far the longest story in *The conference of the birds*. It is preceded by the disclosure to the birds of the ancient secret of their kinship with King Simorgh. The birds' leader, the hoopoe, then impresses on their minds what a true lover of the King should be. Every bird is greatly inspired now and cannot wait to enter the way to find that King.

Moreover, the tale is placed just before the moment the birds actually set off on that way. This moment is an awe-inspiring one, because the birds get a first glimpse of the emptiness of the way, which greatly frightens them. At this point, the hoopoe instructs them further. The context of homily on both sides of the story could not be more significant.

Indeed, the context of the story enhances the words of Attar when he admonishes the reader during a didactic aside to always be alert. The story is meant as a lesson in humility, not only for the winged pilgrims-to-be, but also for the readers, especially when they are about to set foot on the way. If a great sheikh like San'an could fall, what about us?

Do not imagine only he could fall;
This hidden danger lurks within us all,
Rearing its bestial head when we begin
To tread salvation's path [...]
Destroy these hindrances to love or you
Must suffer that disgrace the sad sheikh knew.

The sheikh himself would later speak in a similar way. He requests his disciples to refrain from readily judging his plight when they leave him, bewildered as they are by his love-mad conduct in Rum:

Should anyone reproach my actions, say
That countless others have pursued this Way,
This endless Way where no one is secure,
Where danger waits and issues are unsure.

Let us first further explore this context of the story.

4. THE BIRDS LEARN ABOUT THEIR KING AND THE WAY

The birds do not have the slightest idea about why they should follow the spiritual way, let alone about who their king Simorgh is. That is why they ask their leader for a motivation to the imminent journey, and for an explanation of what connects them to Him. In response to this, the hoopoe expounds the kinship between Him and them in terms of light and shadow:

When long ago the Simorgh first appeared –
His face like sunlight when the clouds have cleared –
He cast unnumbered shadows on the earth,
On each one fixed His eyes, and each gave birth.
Thus we were born; the birds of every land
Are still his shadows [...]

This means that only God truly exists; everything else is an emanation of Him. The image of the shadow shows that it is absurd to entertain any separateness in the form of an object or image in relation to God, as in idolatry.

The homily emphasises that the kinship is not a matter of identity; yet it is extremely intimate. As the Quran Sura 50:16 states: “He is closer than the jugular vein.”

If there is a way through the seven valleys at all, it would be an inner, not an outer one:

No one can bear His beauty face to face,
And for this reason, of His perfect grace,
He makes a mirror in our hearts – look there
To see Him, search your hearts with anxious care.

In order to be eligible for the way, one has to become a true lover of the divine friend first. To Attar, true love defies social and religious conventions.

It implies turning away from matters of the world, in order to seek only the beloved One. The love for the One, because of Oneness, should be passionately singular, total, and unique. The hoopoe expounds:

A lover ...
 Is one in whom all thoughts of Self have died;
 [...]
 Give up this hindrance, give up mortal sight,
 For only then can you approach the light.
 [...]
 The Self and faith must both be tossed away;
 [...]
 Love has no time for blasphemy or faith,
 [...]
 A mote of love exceeds all bounds; it gives
 The vital essence of whatever lives.
 [...]
 Islam and blasphemy have both been passed
 By those who set out on love's path at last;
 [...]
 When neither blasphemy nor faith remain,
 The body and the Self have both been slain;
 [...]
 Forget what is, and what is not Islam;

First, the concern about one's mental and physical existence should be given up. That concern, the drive towards self-maintenance as an organism, is called in Sufism "self" (*nafs*). Otherwise, the love for the King would not be total. Consequently, any concept of religion as one knows it, should also be abandoned, since it tends to be biased by self-interest of persons and groups.

As pointed out earlier, this homily precedes the tale of sheikh San'an and the Christian girl. That tale is followed by the birds' eager first steps on the way. They are excited by what they have just heard, but are immediately terrified by what they are witnessing:

The throng set out – but, clearing the first dune,
 Their leader sent a cry up to the moon
 And panic spread among the birds; they feared
 The endless desolation which appeared.
 [...]
 How featureless the view before their eyes,
 An emptiness where they could recognize
 No marks of good or ill – a silence where
 The soul knew neither hope nor blank despair.

Indeed, the first experience of the way is an intimation of what they have been told: the way is beyond anything they can know or imagine.

This setting of the tale of Sheikh San'an and the Christian girl within *The conference of the birds* prepares us for its interpretation.

5. SUFI TENETS

I propose to read it from the perspective of the interrelated main Sufi tenets,⁴ namely the necessity of dissolving the self; the necessity of abandoning all kinds of idolatry, and the condition of passionate love beyond all conventions.

The ultimate aim is the annihilation (*fana*) of the Sufi into God. Essential to the dissolution of the self – to become free of selfishness – is to recognise and abandon one's pride.

6. PRIDE

According to Attar's account of the sheikh's life, he had collected a large number of spiritual credits and had acquired impressive social acclaim. The number of his disciples could not be more complete: they totalled four hundred. Although it is not mentioned at first that he was proud about his accomplishments, status, and fame, he shows to be aware of them. This is the more significant, as it is mentioned in the same verse as that which speaks about the dream heralding his downfall:

Though conscious of his credit in their [the people's] sight,
A strange dream troubled him, night after night.

Attar's emphasis on the sheikh's spiritual credits may suggest that the latter was indeed not entirely free from pride. In fact, later, once in love, he realises:

True, I have lost the fame I once held dear,
[...] and fraud as well, and fear.

7. THE CHRISTIAN GIRL CHALLENGES THE SHEIKH

Whatever may have been the case, the Christian girl severely challenges any self-esteem he may have had. When the sheikh professes his love

⁴ See Attar (2011: Introduction).

for her and requests her company, she sets outrageous conditions. He complies with them and, in doing so, loses everything he might have been proud of. He sits down in the dust of the girl's alley among stray dogs, accepts wine and gets drunk, gives up his faith, and consequently his status as a sheikh. Eventually, he follows the girl's infamous requirement to herd her swine in the mud of her garden. His desperate disciples leave him now and turn back to Mecca. All he knew is lost to him.

So much for the first Sufi tenet, the destruction of pride. As will be noted later, this is not yet the destruction of self.

8. PASSIONATE LOVE

The enchantment by the girl introduces the sheikh to another Sufi tenet: passionate love. Attar's account suggests that the sheikh was not yet a mature lover of the divine. At least, nothing is mentioned about it in the enumeration of his spiritual credits. His dream at the height of his fame may be taken as a sign of this. The enamoured sheikh exclaims to his disciples: "Why is it, I was not in love before?"

At first sight, the love experience, through which the sheikh is going, seems to fit well into the Sufi tenet: it is passionate and total:

[...] she alone
Lived in his heart, all other thoughts had flown.

The sheikh professes that no piety is holy to him. His love, in fact, goes far beyond the limits of social and religious decorum. He even resorts to blasphemy, as he cries out:

I have no faith
Her face is heaven [...]
God Himself has lit this flame.
I will [...] bow down in dust, but for my idol's sake.

The sheikh's behaviour has traits of what is called *qalandariyya*, deliberate, conspicuously impious conduct, practised by vagabond dervishes, the Qalandars, such as drinking wine, blasphemy, and adopting Christian ways.⁵

However, this is only a case of superficial likeliness. In the sheikh's case, this *qalandariyya* is neither out of spiritual freedom, nor deliberate. He feels *compelled* to comply with the girl's transgressive demands, because of his mad passion for her. Similarly, his outrageous statements

5 Karamustafa (2006).

do not *really* testify to a spiritual state in which “Islam and blasphemy have both been passed”. His exclamations move from faith to blasphemy, not beyond them.

Indeed, the sheikh realises that there is something deeply wrong with this passion, even though he cannot resist it. He sighs:

O Lord, when will this darkness end?
 I must obey her now – what I have done
 Is worse than any crime beneath the sun.
 In that sad instant all he had been, fled
 And passion's smoke obscured his heart and head.

9. IDOLATRY

Attar emphatically points to the reason for this: the sheikh's love is for the girl's apparent beauty. He is mesmerised by “the idol's face”, as the poet has it. And he knows it:

Where is the luck to waken me, or move
 Love's idol to reciprocate my love?
 [...] I spurned idolatry
 When sober, but your beauty is to me
 An idol for whose sake I'll gladly burn
 My faith's Qur'an.

The sheikh even blasphemously compares the girl to God, with the same image the hoopoe used when speaking to the birds about the relationship between their King Simorgh and themselves:

You are the sun and I a shadow, thrown
 By you [...]

Idolatry comes with a high prize, as the sheikh is soon to learn. Beauty is a divine gift. It is an invitation into intimacy. The motive and response to beauty is love. Ultimately, to a Sufi, beauty is given to draw the beholder into the absolute intimacy of his/her source, and to cease to be a beholder.⁶ But as long as there is a sense of beauty in itself, there is duality. When beauty is idolised, union into intimacy is impossible. One cannot unite with beauty. One cannot stop to be a beholder in this instance. For idolatry, a degree of distance is required, impeding the fiery desire to unite. Love turns into passion – and passion into suffering. Because of this insolvable

6 Beauty in a relative sense, in creation, is originally also designed to bring the charmer and charmed into intimacy. There it serves the function of physical union and procreation.

desire, idolatry is enslaving. Idolatry is not for lovers. In Sufi terms: annihilation (*fana*) into an idol is the very example of a contradiction.

Let us recall the context of the story, with the homily about the nature of the true lover, at one end, and the glimpse of the featureless nature of the way, at the other. There is no place whatsoever for an idol in this instance. I suggest: the creation of an idol is the result of any objectifying activity, a *conceptum*, whether concerning a mundane matter or a sacred one, including the One (“the One”).

Idolising the beauty of appearance in women (or in men) is neither for free, nor liberating, neither for the one who cultivates idolatric beauty, nor for the one who is attracted to it. It tends to be a way of binding and being bound, in service of the ego-self, gratifying either selfish exposure or selfish satisfaction. This binding does not belong to the way of the Sufi. Attar intensifies the whole issue by conspicuously objectifying the girl’s beauty, repeatedly describing her as an idol. He makes a strong case of deception by appearances. Her outward beauty is not matched by beauty of intention, at least for the time being.

Yet there must have been a powerful urge in the sheikh to meet the one divine friend, though he would still have had concepts about the One. In his dream, this clearly surfaced in the disguise of the imaginary idol, and it becomes even more obvious in the encounter with the girl. That is, in his search for the One, the direction of his love turns out to not go beyond what he already knows: beauty of form. He is even enchanted by the *seduction* of beauty, while passing by beauty itself. At that moment, he could not avoid idolatry. He has to transgress this stage to arrive at the intuition that the One is formless, ungraspable, unknowable – though the sheikh may have professed this as a beautiful concept in his function of spiritual teacher – and through this, arrive at the awareness of the One’s omnipresence, immanent in all and every form of creation, and eventually find no duality in the formless and form.

Attar’s tale emphasises the unlikely match between the sheikh and the girl by the conspicuous age gap between the two. The sheikh is way past middle age, the lady a girl. She does not let the occasion pass to bring this home to the sheikh. In fact, the girl gives the sheikh a clear warning:

[...] You shameless fool, take my advice –
 Prepare yourself for death and paradise!
 Forget flirtatious games, your breath is cold;
 Stop chasing love, remember you are old.
 It is a shroud you need, not me!

However, the sheikh does not heed her advice and he has to pay. The girl makes no bones about it then, that to her, "love" is conditional. She commands him, if he is to be worthy of her love, to totally abandon all he holds dear:

Burn the Qur'an, drink wine, seal up faith's eye,
Bow down to images.

In short, she makes him feel to his core that idolatric love is enslaving: its conditionality keeps the ego-self of the person alive.

10. SEEKING AND GUIDANCE

In Attar's stories, we can usually identify personifications of the seeking Sufi and the divine guidance. As to the sheikh, it is obvious which role he initially plays. In the first part of the story, he is the seeker. As to the Christian girl, I propose to view her as an agency of the divine in this instance. After all, she enables the sheikh to give up pride and to taste passionate love. As long as the seeker maintains a self, dependent on pride and reputation, no progress can be expected on the way. Sufis take overwhelming love as the best remedy against pride, and this is what, unknowingly, the girl evokes. As suggested earlier, the sheikh probably did not know this love. Even though, when it came, it was misdirected towards idolisation, he has now got a taste of it.

Moreover, by teasing and humiliating him, the girl imparts the strong message not to go into idolatry, as if she wants to say: "My appearance is not the One you are searching."

Let us assume that the sheikh was so fixed on his spiritual practices that the sense of true love could only be awakened by strong means, paradoxically by the outrageous conditions the girl sets. This sense is ignited, in this instance, through the love between man and woman, and gets an extra bite by her different religion, which is allegedly incompatible with Islam. At the same time, as noted earlier, he was strongly attracted to physical beauty, to which he may have been vulnerable, due to the exceptionally strong emphasis on transcendent spirituality in his life, possibly causing psychological imbalance.⁷

⁷ Anvar (Attar 2013:119) reads this story as an exhortation to arrive at the harmony between the masculine and the feminine, between God transcendent and immanent, between God beyond creation and God in every aspect of creation.

The life-changing meeting with the Christian girl may have been for the sheikh what the encounter with Shamsoddin of Tabriz was for Rumi. Both were transformed from scholars to lovers.

11. THE COMPASSIONATE INTERCESSION BY THE COMPANION

The story tells that the sheikh eventually passes through this major test in his life. It happens through the intercession of a close companion of his. This man of wisdom had not been in Mecca when the sheikh and his disciples set out for Rum. He enquires about the sheikh among the disciples, who have returned to Mecca, completely baffled about their master's outrageous behaviour. When they relate what happened, he severely censures them for having left him:

Is this devoted love? Shame on you all,
Fair-weather friends, who run when great men fall.

The companion impresses on the disciples that they should have followed their master in all and everything he went through.

All of them go to Rum again. For forty nights and days they pray to the Almighty to guide the sheikh to truth. The sheikh's companion does so in private. After this period of intense prayer, the latter receives a vision of the prophet, who reassures him that his plea has been answered. All return to Mecca, now including the sheikh.

The role of the sheikh's companion deserves attention in its own right. Apparently, the sheikh could not get out of his plight himself. Although his pride was broken, and he had tasted passionate love, this was conditional: it was tied to his idolisation of the girl, whereby the idolater remained and maintained a separate individuality, falling short of surrender to the divine. After all, the source and issue of idolatry is the sense of duality between man and God. Attar's message seems to be that one cannot attain freedom from this on one's own, that is, as an individual. Freedom from idolatry needs grace that is bestowed through the love of mediation, in this case by the companion.

Another striking act of the companion invites comment. By his instruction to the disciples that they should have followed the sheikh through all of his tribulations, even though his conduct seemed without any sense or sign of wisdom, he instils into them the message that they have missed an important opportunity on the way to be free from the fetters of self (*nafs*). The disciples could have tasted liberation, like their

preceptor. Essentially, they lacked real love for their master, the love that did compel the sheikh's companion to join him in his dire condition and to intercede by prayer.

The sheikh does not simply return to his ways before the meeting with the girl. He is purified, as Attar has it. The poet states: "[...] his old Self died".

12. THE CHRISTIAN GIRL'S DREAM

Now the tables are turned. The girl of Rum gets a dream:

A voice said: "Rise, follow your lost sheikh's way;
Accept his faith, beneath his feet be dust;
You tricked him once, be pure to him and just,
And, as he took your path without pretence,
Take his path now in truth and innocence."

Deeply remorseful about teasing the sheikh, she follows this admonition. Goes after him into the desert. Is bewildered by its endless vacancy. Falls down, exhausted. The sheikh's heart knows about the transformation in the girl, and this urges him to turn around in order to meet her anew. This meeting is a wonderful moment of tenderness:

The sheikh hung over her dear face and wept.
She woke, and seeing tears like rain in spring
Knew he'd kept faith with her through everything.

After all, the sheikh may not have truly loved before he met her, and the girl may not have been loved like this before she met him. Then she asks him to explain to her the mysteries of the way. He does so gladly. She accepts them and dies. "She was a drop returned to Truth's great sea [...]" This may be taken as a symbolic expression of annihilation (*fana*) into the divine.

13. LOVE BEYOND RELIGION AS WE KNOW IT

The tale of sheikh San'an and the Christian girl is not a sweet story of interfaith love: Islam and Christianity seem to be incompatible.⁸ There is a suggestion of conversion in the message about the girl, which the sheikh receives on his way back to Mecca:

8 The Azarbaijani poet Huseyn Javid (1882-1941) wrote the romantic verse play *Sheikh San'an* (1912-1914), based on Attar's text, in which the sheikh transcends religions and develops a belief in universal love and humanism.

The sheikh's heart spoke: "The Christian is no more; the girl you loved knocks at religion's door – it is our way she follows now [...]".

But "our way" is not religion as sheikh San'an knew it before meeting the Christian girl. He had to go through the harsh lesson of giving up pride, of experiencing passionate love, and of abandoning idolatry. Similarly with the girl. While for *him* the meeting with the Christian girl was conducive to his transformation into a lover, *he* was instrumental in the *girl's* annihilation into divinity. Each went through the roles of seeker and divine agent, in relation to each other, each in their due time. This seems to be the instructive beauty of the story of Sheikh San'an and the Christian girl, beyond religion as we know it.⁹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ATTAR, FARID AL-DIN

2011. *The conference of the birds*. Translated with an introduction by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis. Revised edition London: Penguin.

2013. *Le cantique des oiseaux*. Translated by Leili Anvar. Paris: Éditions Diane de Selliers.

DE GROOT, R.

2010. Edward Said and polyphony. In: A. Iskandar & H. Rustom (eds.), *Edward Said: A legacy of emancipation and representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 204-228.

2011. Rumi and the abyss of longing. In: L. Lewisohn (ed.), *The Mawlana Rumi Review, Vol. 2* (Cyprus: Rumi Institute, Near East University, and Exeter: the Rumi Studies Group of the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter), pp. 60-93. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25898566-00201008>

KARAMUSTAFA, A.T.

2006. *God's unruly friends: Dervish groups in the Islamic Middle Period 1200-1550*. London: Oneworld.

SEYED-GOHRAB, A.

2015. *Soefisme, een levende traditie*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, Bert Bakker.

WAAIJMAN, C.J. & WERKHOVEN, J.

2015. *Lokroep van het onuitsprekelijke. Gesprekken*. Leeuwarden: Discovery Books.

⁹ The present interpretation offers similarities with Seyed-Gohrab's (2015:64-72) analysis of the story of sheikh San'an and the Christian girl in terms of the seven valleys of the avian pilgrimage.

Keywords

Mystagogic story

Sufism

Seduction by beauty

Interfaith love

Trans-faith conversion

Trefwoorde

Mistagogiese verhaal

Soefisme

Verleiding deur skoonheid

Inter-geloof liefde

Trans-geloof bekering