

# Syncretism, Universalism and Religious Pluralism in the Poetry of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

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## Abstract

Rūmī's approach to interfaith topics is characterised by syncretism, universalism and religious pluralism. This article begins by defining these terms as well as the concept of inclusivism, followed by a brief biography of Rūmī and a close reading of relevant texts contained in his collection of lyrical and didactic poetry (to wit, the *Dīvān-i-Shams-i Tabriz* and *Mathnavī-yi Ma'navī* respectively) before a concluding discussion.

## Definition of Syncretism, Universalism, Religious Pluralism and Inclusivism

Syncretism has hitherto been a nebulous concept. We need to make a cursory review of some of its components before concluding discussion with a workable definition for this article.

It has been defined in the HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion as

the process of combining religious elements of diverse origins in a new sect or movement; a term ... often employed to ascribe insincerity, confusion, or other negative qualities to a nascent religious group. Its usage frequently suggests that while some (non-Western, non-elite, or primitive) religions are formed of a jumble of barely understood components, others (such as Christianity) purportedly exhibit no external influence in their origins and are thus unique and privileged ...

(A)ll others are human inventions, unconnected with divinity or spirituality; ...

The newer tenor of the term continues the implication that participants are too loosely bound to their inherited faiths to resist the current of change in religions (Smith 1995:1042-1043).

Such a combination of teachings, practices and/or doctrines could even occur from apparently contradictory religions to constitute a new, coherent religious pattern (Pye 1971:93 and 1994:212).

Claims have been made that Christianity and Islam are 'un- and anti-syncretic' (Hinnells 1995:507).

Krüger provides the most embracing definition for syncretism when he argues that it refers to "border traffic between two or more religious (or other, such as linguistic) complexes, and to the multitude of relations obtaining between them (such as symbiosis, amalgamation, assimilation, and so on)."

He continues by analysing circumstances promoting this phenomenon:

Syncretism is shorthand for all the ambivalent processes (and their results) taking place on the edges between the unresolvable dual need to create centres of order and fringes of freedom and innovation, to forge identities and to adapt to the environment - within religions, between religions, and between religions and other sociocultural *gestalts* in their environments (for example science and political programmes) (2004:60-61).

Universalism is "(t)he religious belief that all people will be saved (and -YD) is motivated by moral doubts concerning eternal punishment, and by a recognition of the validity of other non-Christian faiths" (Goring 1992:544).

Pye comments that such belief "has usually been regarded as unorthodox or at least controversial in the context of Christian theology, but in many religious systems it is taken for granted" (1994:279).

Religious pluralism is a term of similar purport. According to it, "the various religious traditions may be seen as equally and independently valid" (Heim 1995:103). While it is tolerant of diversity, it does not necessarily adopt a capricious attitude towards a given faith (Heim 1995:7).

Inclusivism affirms that salvation is possible through other faiths because the same God Who guides most decisively by means of Christianity (or any other faith) can offer salvation within or via other traditions (Heim 1995:4, 117). Here, other faiths are judged through the touchstone of one's own faith. There is

thus a strong tendency to identify similarities in other religious which, according to Adler, are particularly evident in moral doctrines (1990:86-87). But the various traditions are far less congruent: each has its peculiar beliefs and practices (Heim 1995:5). In relation to pluralism, it is more absolutist and hegemonic.

Underlying these definitions is the rejection of exclusivity claims by a particular religion for promising salvation; while there could apparently be conflict among the beliefs and practices of different religions they indubitably lead to the identical goal.

At this stage we turn our attention to Rūmī by presenting his brief biography, followed by a discussion of his literary accomplishments and a close reading of relevant texts.

## Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

### *His Life:*

Schimmel writes:

No *Sūfī* poet has exerted a vaster influence on Muslim East and Christian West than Jalāl al-Dīn, called *Mawlānā*, or *Mawlawī*, 'our master'. His Persian works are considered the most eloquent expression of Islamic mystical thought, and his long mystico-didactic poem, the *Mathnavī*, has been called 'the *Qur'ān* in the Persian language' by the great fifteenth-century poet Jāmī of Herat (1987:482).

He was born in Balkh, in present-day Afghanistan. Before the Mongol invasion of 1220, his father Bahā al-Dīn Walad took his family to Syria via Iran where Jalāl al-Dīn studied Arabic history and literature. They then settled in Anatolia, which then lay outside the authority of the Mongol hordes and had granted sanctuary to numerous mystics and scholars from the eastern lands of Islam. The latter enjoyed the liberal patronage of the Saljūq ruler. Jalāl al-Dīn married there, and in 1226 his first son, Sultān Walad, was born. Bahā al-Dīn was invited to Konya, the capital city of the Saljūq dynasty, to teach in one of its seminaries. After his death in 1231, Jalāl al-Dīn succeeded him in the chair.

In 1236, the Mongols invaded Anatolia. Amidst the internal upheavals, Jalāl al-Dīn met the wandering dervish Shams al-Dīn ("Sun of the Religion") in 1244. The two men spent weeks together in mystical union without eating, drinking, or experiencing any bodily needs. Whereas these discussions led Jalāl al-Dīn into intense mystical love they ignited anger and jealousy among his students and family.<sup>1</sup> Thereupon, Shams left Konya.

Feeling the pangs of separation, Rūmī suddenly became a poet who sang of his love and longing while whirling around to the sound of music. He found this

transformation unfathomable, singing purely due to the spirit of the beloved. Composition was spontaneous, without compliance to norms of rhyme and metre.

When news of the sighting of Shams in Damascus reached Rūmī, he sent Sultān Walad to fetch him. Once more the intense spiritual rapport between them continued, leading to the same reaction from family and friends. Rūmī reached the stage of total spiritual annihilation (*fanā'*) in Shams, his beloved and true interpreter of the secrets of Prophet Muhammad.

Shams disappeared permanently in 1248. Rūmī then found spiritual solace with Salāh al-Dīn, an illiterate goldsmith. He became a mirror for Rūmī.

Meanwhile, the number of Rūmī's disciples continued growing among all sectors of society which also included women. Outstanding among his disciples in piety and obedience was the youthful Husām al-Dīn Chelebi, who now became Rūmī's third source of inspiration.

In 1256, Rūmī began composing his mystical *Mathnavī* for the benefit of his students. Despite some interruptions, the dictation of this composition continued up to 1273, the year of his death. This event was lamented by Muslims, Jews and Christians of Konya since his friendship had extended to everyone.

Finally, when Sultān Walad assumed the leadership of the disciples he shaped them into a proper mystical fraternity called the *Mevlevī* order. He institutionalised the mystical dance which has remained current up to now.

### **His Works:**

Rūmī's writings can be divided into two parts: the lyrical poetry generated by his meetings with Shams, found in upward of 36000 verses of the *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabriz*, and the didactic *Mathnavī-yi Ma'navī* of about 26000 verses. There are also prose pieces in the form of casual discussions and more than a hundred letters written to dignitaries and family members.

The *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabriz* translates the author's experiences into poetry while the *Mathnavī* displays orality in its use of stories embedded in stories and digressions. "This vast poem ... ranges over the entire field of Sufi speculation; the anecdotes that intersperse the discourse are brilliantly told, abounding in wisdom and humour" (Arberry 1963:111). The subject in all his poetry is constantly love, the meeting between lover and beloved, the secrets of seeking and finding, of happiness in despair.

Love entails self-sacrifice for gaining new spiritual life and transformation. Love for the Divine Being begets unity with God, before which the multiplicity of phenomena is only a veil.

Everything in this world becomes a symbol of some higher unity.

This loving relationship is also expressed in prayer, the language of the soul. Prayer remains a gift of God to people.

This world is the cultivating field for the hereafter where the effects of one's worldly actions will be evident. Death, therefore, is the true mirror that will

show everyone his/her real face (Schimmel 1987:482-485).

Rūmī's legacy in the Islamic World and elsewhere has been colossal. Translations of and commentaries on his works are to be found in Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Turkish, Sindhi, Pashto, Punjabi, Bengali and Arabic. "Indeed, it would be difficult to find any literary and mystical work composed between Istanbul and Bengal which contains no allusion to R'ūmī's thought or quotation from his verse" (Schimmel 1994:5). He is the best known mystic and poet from the Islamic World in the West and the best-selling poet in the United States. Many of his works have been translated into and commented upon in European languages ranging from English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Polish, Czech and Greek to Russian and Swedish. Even Hebrew and Japanese translations of some works are available

Some of these Western writers have even turned to spiritual practices imported from the East and currently designated as New Age Spirituality.

Psychologists and novelists, among them Helen Luke, Erich Fromm, Doris Lessing and Stephen Mitchell have been attracted to it.

Multimedia productions of his poems in both the original and translated versions have been made, either as renditions or with *Mevelevī* musical accompaniments.

Some genres of modern ballet and dance as well as opera have been inspired by Rūmī.

Several websites associated with him and videos on him are available, as are paintings and sketches of the perennial master.

Rūmī has indeed turned into a fully-fledged consumer icon whereby acclaimed motivational speaker, Deepak Chopra, in conjunction with Hollywood superstars like Madonna and Martin Sheen reciting some of his poetry on CD (Schimmel 1994:6 and Lewis 2003:1-3 and 499-643).

Such patterns naturally intensify anxiety among scholars "as pop culture dilutes and distorts his message, with a foreboding sense that modern secular culture will inevitably reduce the sacral to the banal through its relentless commercialism and consumerism" (Lewis 2003:4).

The Sufi order attributed to him has exerted a significant influence in many parts of the Muslim World (Carmody and Carmody 1996:261).

Rūmī's themes pertaining to syncretism and universalism shall now be presented, with appropriate clarification where necessary.

## Themes of Syncretism and Universalism

1. An understanding of the reality of the hereafter, which is complex, enables a person to overlook religious differences. Divergence results from the pursuit of selfishness.

Proceed beyond the level of selfish possessions, as the objects desired by your nature are rejected and vile. Through it (i.e. your nature), various paths have been made easy with the faith of each group becoming its life-giving force. Had God facilitated only a particular path, every Jew and Magi would have been aware of Him.

.....

When something harmonious with its natural desires expires, it fails to yield growth and tillage - just like barren soil.

.....

Seek a spiritual guide for you shall not be able to grasp the reality of the finality of the hereafter<sup>2</sup> in genealogy. Ascertaining the reality of the hereafter is no easy task, for had this been so there would not have been religious differences (*Mathnavī* 1991:1/24-25).

The need for a spiritual guide shall be elaborated upon under 5 below.

2. Theological differences are not the criteria for determining a person's true faith. The doors to Divine Grace encompass everything, thus making every individual eligible for receiving God's Mercy. Both positive and negative qualities serve a Divine purpose

When an old disbeliever becomes penitent, he turns into a Muslim on account of his apology. The Lord is full of mercy and kindness; both existence and extinction serve Him. Denial and faith serve that glorious Being just as copper and silver are components (slaves) of that elixir (*Mathnavī* 1991:1/121).

Here are two more examples:

Look at those two fellow-washermen: outwardly there is conflict between the one and the other.

The one has thrown cotton garments into the water while the other is drying them several times.

Again, the first one wets the clothes, almost as if he is spitefully contriving the opposite.

But these two opposites exhibiting strife are of one mind and doing one task in agreement (*Mathnavī* 1991:I/152-153).

Both Moses and Pharaoh are to be found in your existence: You should seek these two adversaries in your being. Until the Resurrection the descendant (progeny) of Moses shall remain: it is not another light; only the lamp is different.

This earthenware and wick are different but its light is not different to the one Yonder.

If you look into the mirror you will be confounded because the mirror only creates multiplicity and dualism.

But if you look into the light you will be spared the physical multiplicity and dualism.

O essence of creation! Through the (different) perspectives emerge the difference between the Believer, the Magi and the Jew (*Mathnavī* 1991:III/444-445).

Since this is the world of darkness and the occult, this earth is necessary for the (existence of the) shadow.

Till the Resurrection these seventy-two sects will remain: the arguments of the innovator will not diminish.

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Every doctrine that is not laudable is a mountain-pass, an obstruction and a highway-robber.

This doctrine has become the adversary of that one so that the uncritical imitator may be perplexed (since) he sees the truth of both parties in their doctrine: each sect is pleased with its path.

If it has no reply (to counter arguments) it clings obstinately to the very same utterance until the Day of Resurrection:

'Our elders know the answers even if the correct reason is hidden from us' (*Mathnavī* 1991:V/987-988).

The light image in the first example explains that the refraction of truth's light into the human plane of existence causes religious differences resulting from varied perceptions of it.

Contrary states are found because the world reflects obscurity. But people who abdicate their normal intellectual responsibilities tenaciously cling to the views of their predecessors, believing that the latter were more insightful. As a result of such apathy and sluggishness, they reveal their own confusion. Moreover, the reasons for many of the predecessors' views remain unknown to succeeding generations.

The limited vision of people, which impedes people from appreciating this inner single reality, is ably illustrated in the divergent descriptions of an elephant's appearance by a crowd of people one dark night after they had touched different parts of the animal. Those who had touched its trunk compared the elephant to a water-spout. Those in contact with its legs compared it to pillars. Another group that had touched its back compared the elephant to a throne. The mystic continues:

- Due to different angles their statements (also) diverged; one gave it (i.e. the trunk) the title of an angled letter (*dāl*) while another gave it the title of a straight letter (*alif*).

.....

If each of them had a lamp in his/her hand, the difference in their utterance would have been removed. The physical eye is only like the palm of one's hand which does not cover the entire (elephant's) body (*Mathnavī* 1991:III/445).

3. Conflict between the different outward forms and the single inner reality (faith).

This has already been alluded to under 2 above. The following discussion is more explicit:

Every prophet and saint has a special code of conduct. But they all lead to God: all are one (*Mathnavī* 1991:I/153).

.....



Many are the believers, but their faith is one. Many are their bodies though their soul be one (*Mathnavī* 1991:IV/646).

In the following texts, the poet advises that one should rather try to comprehend the deeper meaning of events in order to resolve paradoxes.

In the greetings and salutations sent to the pious, praise of all prophets is blended.

The praises of all have been combined and the cups poured into a single basin.

The reason (for it) is that the Praised One is not more than one: from this angle religions are not more than one. Understand that praises which proceed to the Divine Light are lent to (created) faces and persons.

When do people praise anyone besides the Rightful Being? Nevertheless, sinners err on account of vain fancy. (The Divine Light) in relation to phenomena is like a light shining on a wall: the wall is like a connector for the rays.

Invariably when the rays are traced to their source, the errant person loses the moon and stops praising it.

Or when a reflection of the moon appears in a well he puts his head into the well and praises it.

Actually he is praising the moon although his ignorance causes him to turn his face towards the moon's reflection. His praises are for the moon, not for that image. When matters are misunderstood they become disbelief (*Mathnavī* 1991:III/488).

.....

I speak of their souls in name alone  
Since one soul becomes a hundred in relation to their bodies.  
Just as the light of one celestial sun

Becomes one hundred in relation to the different walls of houses.

But all their beams become one  
When you demolish the inner walls (*Mathnavī* 1991:IV/646).

Here are some more examples of the unity of all faiths:

The Jew, the polytheist, the Christian and the Magi - all were made of one colour by that great hero.

A hundred thousand shadows short and long become one in the light of that sun of mystery.

Neither a long shadow remained, nor a short or a wide one: shadows of every kind were pawned (for absorption) in the sun.

But the single colour pervading the Resurrection is shown to the evil and the virtuous alike.

.....

During these times, people's inward beliefs are (as different) as a piebald cow, and in the different religions the spindle of speech is spinning a hundred colours.

This is the turn of a hundred colours and a hundred minds: how will the world of one colour be manifested? (*Mathnavī* 1991:VI/1134).

The multiplicity of religions is only a phenomenon of this world. Its reality in the primordial state as well as in the hereafter is marked by singularity.

If there be a hundred books, they are nothing more than one chapter; the focal point of a hundred directions is only the (single) niche.

In brief, these paths end in one house; these thousand ears are from one seed (*Mathnavī* 1991:VI/1221).

Thus in reality God is the object of all worship since treading various paths occurs for the sake of His Pleasure. But some have focussed on the tail: although the head is the principal, they have lost it.

But that head treats these misguided ones travelling via the tail with proper justice (bounty).

The one obtains it (i.e. the Divine Object) from the head and the other from the tail. But another group have lost both the head and the foot.

Since everything has been lost, they have found everything. Through coming from less, they have sped towards the whole (*Mathnavī* 1991:VI/1226).

In the first portion, the unity of faiths is discussed. It has various manifestations of unequal quality, an issue which shall be further clarified under 5 below. In the final portion of the extract above, a contrast is made with mystics who gain everything by self annihilation.

Syncretism and universalism are unmistakable in the following:

This house wherein there is continually the sound of the viol,

Ask of the master what house is this.

What means this idol-form, if this is the house of the Ka'ba?

And what means this light of God, if this is a Magian temple? (*The Divani Shamsi Tabriz* 1952:59).

This is the house of love, which has no bound or end

(*The Divani Shamsi Tabriz* 1952:61).

What is to be done, o Muslims? For I do not recognise myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Magi, nor Muslim.

.....

I am not of the earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire.

.....

I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise, nor of Hell.

.....

My place is the placeless, my trace is the traceless;

It is neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the beloved (*The Divani Shamsi Tabriz* 1952:125)

The man of God is beyond infidelity and religion,

To the man of God right and wrong are alike (*The Divani Shamsi Tabriz* 1952:31).

4. The unity of truth is only known to enlightened people of God. Other individuals and groups claim a monopoly over it, thereby engaging them-

selves in perpetual conflict.

Dear brother! The wisdom coming to you is from the saints and is only lent to you.

Although a house senses radiance within it, the light is shining from a neighbour.

Be grateful! Do not be deceived by vanity and do not show disdain! Listen and never be proud!

What a great pity that this borrowing (of an unreal state of assertion) has distanced religious communities from one another.

I am the slave of one who does not regard himself as having reached the feast table (i.e. he has not reached the stage of perfection) (*Mathnavī* 1991:I/161).

5. While several paths lead to God, they are not all of the same quality. For instance, anthropomorphism reflects limited understanding. Despite this discrepancy, Divine forbearance condones blemished beliefs which indicates once again that religious formalities are not crucial.

Although I am free from your (mode of) remembering Me and pictorial images do not befit My very Being,  
The one intoxicated with pictorial images and fancy cannot comprehend Our Being without similitude.  
Anthropomorphic remembrance is a defective thought;  
the description of royalty is exempt from it (*Mathnavī* 1991:II/280).

Anyone sincerely aspiring to link up with God must be commended - not condemned on flimsy pretexts like faulty expressions. This principle of tolerance is illustrated in the confrontation between Moses and a shepherd as well as the consequences thereof. Since this anecdote contains some of R'mī's most brilliant poetry, it is quoted in some detail below:

The event begins with the expression of extremely tender thoughts by an illiterate shepherd, wishing to serve the All-Loving God in the manner of a little slave in bondage to his master. Briefly, he would like to mend his shoes, comb his hair and remove lice from it, milk his cow, wash his clothes, and so on.

Moses then rebukes him:

Enough! You have retrogressed! You have not become a Muslim, but have become an infidel!  
What prattle, infidelity and gibberish is this! You should

squeeze cottonwool into your mouth.

The odour of your infidelity has made the whole world stink; it has worn out the brocade of religion.

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The friendship of one devoid of intellect is enmity. The Almighty is free from service like this! (*Mathnavi* 1991:II/281).

Moses's position is literalistic and legalistic. At the same time, it emphasises the value of intellect for reaching God.

Moses is then severely reprimanded by God:

A revelation reached Moses from God: You have separated Our servant from Us.

Did you come (as a prophet) to unite or separate?

As far as possible, don't put your foot in separation: the most despised thing for Me is divorce (separation).

For each person have I designated a mode of conduct; to each have I given a special form of expression

Which is worthy of praise for him but blameworthy for you: for him, honey and for you, poison.

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I have not decreed anything for My benefit but only to bestow generosity on my servants:

For Hindus the Indian idiom is praiseworthy; for the Sindhis the Sindhi idiom is praiseworthy.

I have not been sanctified by their glorification; they actually shine and become radiant.

We do not look at the tongue and speech (of a person) but at his/her inner being and condition.

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Lovers always have to be consumed (with Divine love): there is no tax imposed on a desolate village.

If the lover errs in speech, do not consider the person a sinner. If the martyr be full of blood, do not wash him/her.

The blood of martyrs is superior to water; this error is

better than a hundred correct things.

The rule of fixed direction for prayer does not apply to one inside the *Ka'ba* (God's House):

What matters it if the diver does not have on slippers?

Do not seek guidance from the drunken: do not ask people whose garments are torn to pieces to mend them.

The religion of love is different to all religions; for lovers, the religion and faith is God (*Mathnavī* 1991:II/282-283).

The religious imagery in the verses above deserves scrutiny.

Lovers are portrayed as people who will be annihilated by their conduct. They are compared to a desolate village yielding no produce; therefore it is exempt from the imposition of religious taxes. The domain of the lover far exceeds the status of ordinary mortals. Just as ritual bathing, according to Islamic law, is not given to a martyr for his supreme sacrifice so is condemnation invalid for a lover who utters incorrect thoughts. The lover's faulty discourse is deemed as favourable to God as the martyr's impure blood.

The House of God in Mecca constitutes the focal point of prayer for a person anywhere beyond it. However, the person offering prayer inside this building is at liberty to face any desired direction. Here, the lover of God is compared to a person constantly residing in God's House. Therefore, he/she is entitled to dispense with formal and ritual codes. The entire passage makes a brilliant contrast between legal and mystical imagery to stress the special rank of a lover of God.

Moses finally reached the shepherd, informed him that God had excused him and added:

Do not seek any etiquette and sequence/method (in worship). Whatever your distressed heart desires, utter. Your infidelity is (actually) religion and your religion is the light of the spirit: you are saved and the whole world is at peace on your account.

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Indeed, whether you sing His praises or thank Him, it is as ineffectual as the (words of) the cognisant shepherd. Though your praise is better than that one, it is still inferior in relation to God (*Mathnavī* 1991:II/284).

This episode exhibits a clear distinction between a literalist/legalistic and a spiritual observance of Divine guidance. Whereas the former is invaluable as a point of departure for approaching God, it is not the final destination.

In the Introduction to the fifth volume of the *Mathnavī*, Rūmī explains the relationship between the exoteric and esoteric paths:

The Sharī'a (law) is like a lamp showing the path.  
Without it, the path cannot be trodden. The path you  
tread upon is the tariqa. The destination you reach is the  
haqīqa (reality).

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Sharī'a is like learning alchemy from a teacher or book.  
Tariqa is knowledge about the use of chemical com-  
pounds and about polishing the copper with them.  
Haqīq is knowledge about copper's transformation into  
gold.

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Sharī'a is like learning about medicine. Tariqa is knowl-  
edge about abstention from consuming harmful foodstuffs  
according to the requirements of medicine and also about  
taking medicines. Haqīqa is the attainment of permanent  
good health and dispensing with the other two categories  
(1991:V/818-819).

He also offers the following advice:

Get away from this pen and intellect, be averse to them!  
Seek the eye of the unseen world and be prosperous  
(Like Moses drawing light from his pocket)  
where the book is at the free disposal of mentor and  
pupil.  
Nothing apart from giddiness results from this sight and  
mind  
So reflect and choose this hope.

---

If every impertinent person were to discover the truth  
with his lore (virtue)

When would God have sent so many prophets? (*Mathnavī* 1991:IV/790).

Observe with the heart's chambers situated within

So that the accusation of not discerning does not apply to you (*Mathnavī* 1991:V/874).

We now encapsulate some other important features of love for the Divine. According to Rūmī, it implies freedom from greed, cupidity, avarice and hatred (*Mathnavī* 1991:I/172). Humility and respect are pre-requisites for it (*Mathnavī* 1991:I/216). Even in supreme moments, it is within the purview of God. So, in flights of sublimity, the falcon of love flies towards the King (*Mathnavī* 1991:V/938). Pain and suffering are inevitable during this experience (*Mathnavī* 1991:III/581). Life is totally transformed. Concepts, values and connotations change. For instance, Mans'ur Hallāj sought to annihilate himself by declaring that he was God. In the process, he became immortal. But Pharaoh sought to perpetuate his rule by uttering the same statement. In the process, he perished (*Mathnavī* 1991:V/925).

Finally, Rūmī sounds a very important precautionary note which is worth repeating here regarding the distinction between different paths, or between truth and falsehood:

Know this reality: all these persons are not right, nor are  
all of them wrong  
Because (otherwise) falsehood would not have been  
manifested contrary to truth.

---

So long as there is no truth, how should there be falsehood? That falsehood gains illumination from the truth  
(*Mathnavī* 1991:II/338).

In this respect, he insists on the primacy of the Qur'ān and the prophets as spiritual guides to humanity:

When you take refuge with God (or, the truth) in the  
Qur'ān  
You merge with the spirits of prophets.  
The Qur'ān recounts the condition of prophets  
Who are the fishes in the pure ocean of Majesty  
(*Mathnavī* 1991:I/76).



He regards Prophet Muhammad as “the cream of existence” (*Mathnavī* 1991:1/101) and “the name of all prophets” (*Mathnavī* 1991:1/55), thereby qualifying him to be the perfect man *par excellence* and an ideal example to emulate.

## Conclusion

This article is an appraisal of ecumenical thoughts represented in the *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabriz* and *Mathnavī-yi Ma'navī* anthologies of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. For this purpose, the concepts of syncretism, universalism, religious pluralism and inclusivism were defined and applied.

According to Rūmī, in view of many paths leading to the same reality affiliation to any formal religion is unnecessary. He can therefore comfortably interact with symbols of various religions like the sound of the viol and idols. On this issue, Lewis maintains:

Rūmī did not come to his theology of tolerance and inclusive spirituality by turning away from traditional Islam or organized religion, but through an immersion in it; his spiritual yearning stemmed from a radical desire to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad and actualize his potential as a perfect Muslim.

Islam itself was an ecumenical religion, teaching that Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, Abraham and the lesser prophets of the Hebrew Bible were all sent by the one true God as successive messengers to mankind (2003:10-11).

Therefore, Rūmī would vehemently object to being accused of initiating a new sect which, for the HarperCollins's Dictionary of Religions, is an ingredient of syncretism. According to Rūmī, ecumenism is the ultimate reality which people of limited vision have failed to grasp (see theme 3 above). Far from displaying questionable motives, he respects the different paths as regards their being in tandem with the temperament of different people (see theme 5 above). The varied approaches to the Ultimate Reality, together with their associated rituals, stem from Divine generosity. So not all of them can be accused of being human inventions, bereft of Divine links. Provided that they comply with the criterion of love of God as defined by Rūmī, they are worthy of acceptance (see theme 5 above).

Yet not all paths enjoy equal validity and quality; the finest of them is shown in the Qur'ān and demonstrated by Prophet Muhammad. Even paths of falsehood serve a Divine objective by starkly highlighting their difference/s from the paths of virtue (see theme 2 above).

These facts remain concealed from selfish and arrogant people who have

defiled their very nature (see themes 1 and 4 above).

A correct understanding of religion elevates its meaningfulness, making a believer more securely anchored in his/her conviction in the face of change. Such an individual is far removed from the insincere, confused (and probably fickle) syncretist defined by the HarperCollins Dictionary of Religions. According to Krüger's verdict about the relations between various faiths, one could safely conclude that Rūmī's viewpoint supports symbiosis.

Rūmī's universalism is ably demonstrated in his understanding of Divine love through which all have the hope of salvation. Beyond theological differences and definitions of infidelity and faith lies a common humanity (see themes 3 and 5 above).

In the light of this analysis, Rūmī may be classified a religious pluralist who refutes charges of the 'un and anti-syncretic' nature of Islam as alleged by Hinnells above.

In the process, he far exceeds the inclusivist ideas found among Muslims renowned for their liberalism [like al-Bīrūnī (d. 1000), al-Shahrastānī (d. 12<sup>th</sup> century), 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (born 1304), Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), Dārā Shikōh (b. 1650), Jān-i-Jānān (d. 1781) (whose details are given by Coward 2000:56-58) and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988)] as well as like-minded non-Muslims. He remains anchored within Islamic theology. Lewis comments: "Indeed, any objective western reader who takes the time to compare the *Divina Commedia* with the *Masnawi*, which is about twice as long as the former, will have to acknowledge that Rūmī, who wrote a half century before Dante, reflects a much more ecumenical spirit and a far broader and deeper religious sensibility" (2003:3).

## Notes

- 1 Lewis comments: "The suggestion that the relationship between Shams and Rumi was a physical and homosexual one entirely misunderstands the context ... Rumi did employ the symbolism of homoerotic, or more properly, androgynous love, in his poems addressed to Shams as the divine beloved, but this merely adopts an already 300-year-old convention of praise in Persian literature" (2003:324).
- 2 For Nicholson, this word denotes "Divine Unity". So he interprets the line to mean: Had Divine Unity been common knowledge, the truth about the oneness of all religions would have been evident. See his translation in Nicholson (1968: II 48)

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