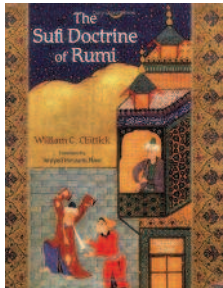


Book Reviews



THE SUFI DOCTRINE OF RUMI: Illustrated Edition

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. FOREWORD BY SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR.
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Reviewed by **Samuel Bendeck Sotillos**

“Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain—thou art the physician of all our ills” –Rūmī

THE OUTPOURING OF INTEREST IN RŪMĪ (1207-1273) or as he is known within the world of Islamic spirituality, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī or simply Mawlānā, “our Master,” in the contemporary West is an overwhelming confirmation of the timeless relevance of traditional wisdom that is neither of the East or West. He is the originator of the renowned “mystical dance” (*semā*), which later became known as the “dance of the whirling dervishes” that is utilized by the Mevlevi or Mawlawiyya Sufi order founded by Rūmī’s followers after his death. How is it that a poet from the thirteenth-century born in Balkh (Khurasan or present-day Afghanistan), who lived most of his life and was buried in Konya (Turkey), has become a celebrated figure in America today? This is again evidence of his universal message that transcends religious and sectarian boundaries, national, cultural, and ethnic divisions and is not limited to time or place. With the rise of Islamophobia, including extremism and xenophobia in all its forms, the message of the saints and sages such as Rūmī provide an antidote to the increasing ignorance, hatred, and violence that are besieging the world today.

THE SUFI DOCTRINE OF RUMI is a revised edition of a work that was initially published in 1974 in Iran by the Aryamehr University in Tehran to celebrate the seven-hundredth anniversary of Rūmī’s death, when Professor Chittick was an assistant professor of Religious Studies at the university. This new

edition is colorfully decorated with calligraphy, Persian and Turkish miniature paintings, which are truly stunning for the eye to gaze upon. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the world’s most respected writers and speakers on Islam and its mystical path, Sufism, was then the Chancellor of Aryamehr University. Nasr discusses the importance of this work for future Rūmī studies in his Foreword to this book:

[This] study of Dr. Chittick has the great merit...of approaching the subject [of Rūmī’s metaphysical teachings] from a strictly traditional point of view untainted by the modernistic fallacies which have colored most of the other studies devoted so far to this subject in Western languages.... May the message of Rūmī serve as a beacon of light to dispel the shadows which prevent modern man from seeing even his own image in its true form and from knowing who he really is.

Rūmī’s major works are the *DĪWĀN-I SHAMS-I TABRĪZĪ* of some 40,000 verses, and the *MATHNAWĪ* containing some 25,000 verses, which is often regarded as “the Qu’ran in the Persian language.” Although no work could fully encompass the totality of Rūmī’s teachings, readers may ask, why yet another book? While numerous books are available they often miss the mark, and do not provide insight into the mystical symbolism of Rūmī’s spiritual universe. Chittick speaks to his intentions behind preparing this work:

Despite numerous studies of him [Rūmī], until now there has been no clear summary in English of the main points of

his doctrines and teachings.... For those who know [Rūmī] only through the popularizing translations [of his poetry], this little book may provide some insight into his universe of meaning. Unlike most Sufi poets, Rūmī explains the meaning of his imagery and symbolism. My task is simply to juxtapose various verses and prose passages to let him say what he wants to say.

While Rūmī is well-known, and celebrated in the present-day, what is lacking are authoritative works accessible for general readers that offer an introduction in clear and accessible language to his magical poetry. This book does just that as it provides an authoritative and accessible presentation of Rūmī’s magisterial teachings and its fundamental themes vis-à-vis the Islamic tradition, which is central to his spiritual universe. The lack of knowledge pertaining to the Islamic tradition tends to obstruct Western readers from understanding the depth of Rūmī.

Sufism is regarded as the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam and is a spiritual path by which the human being can transcend his or her individual egoism to reach the Divine. Chittick explains the distinction and relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of religion:

Exotericism by definition must be limited in some sense, for it addresses itself to a particular humanity and a particular psychological and mental condition—even though its means of addressing itself is to some degree universalized and expanded through time and space to encompass a large segment of the human race. Esotericism also addresses itself to particular psychological types, but it is open inwardly towards the Infinite in a much more direct manner than exotericism, since it is concerned

primarily with overcoming all the limitations of the individual order.

Chittick clarifies the role of the Prophet Muhammad within Sufism as some have tried to separate Sufism from the Islamic tradition as if one could be a Sufi without being a Muslim:

For the Sufis themselves one of the clearest proofs of the integrally Islamic nature of Sufism is that its practices are based on the model of the Prophet Muhammad. For Muslims it is self-evident that in Islam no one has been closer to God—or, if one prefers, no one has attained a more complete spiritual realization—than the Prophet himself, for by the very fact of his prophecy he is the Universal Man and the model for all sanctity in Islam. For the same reason he is the ideal whom all Sufis emulate and the founder of all that later become crystallized within the Sufi orders.

Rūmī confirms that all Sufi orders link back like a chain (*silsilah*) to the Prophet and that without the Prophet Muhammad there would be no Sufism. This is expressed in his lyrical verse: “God’s way is exceedingly fearful, blocked and full of snow. He [the Prophet] was the first to risk his life, driving his horse and pioneering the road. Whoever goes on this road, does so by his guidance and guarding. He discovered the road in the first place and set up waymarks everywhere.”

To the surprise of many Rūmī admirers, who would never accuse him of being narrow-minded, rather than being against orthodox interpretations of religion, Rūmī speaks of orthodoxy as a spiritual necessity to the union with the Divine: “The (right) thought is that which opens a way: the (right) way is that on which a (spiritual) king advances.” The following is another

poetic articulation of Rūmī’s perspective on orthodoxy: “Alter yourself, not the Traditions: abuse your (dull) brain, not the rose-garden (the true sense which you cannot apprehend).”

According to Rūmī, the true nature of the relationship between the Divine and the world of form requires a transcendent wisdom that is outside the reach of normal or rational knowledge:

It...is neither inside of this world nor outside; neither beneath it nor above it; neither joined with it nor separate from it: it is devoid of quality and relation. At every moment thousands of signs and types are displayed by it (in this world). As manual skill to the form of the hand, or glances of the eye to the form of the eye, or eloquence of the tongue to the form of the tongue (such is the relation of that world to this).

Although the Divine confirms the unity of all phenomena in the manifest world, when viewed through the lens of the relative or duality, all things appear as separate and disjointed from one another without a trace that they are essentially interconnected on a higher level. Likewise, knowledge cut off from its transcendent source characterizes the fallen consciousness of humanity. Chittick writes, “The fall of man is the result of the blinding of the ‘eye of the heart’ (*chashm-i dil* or *‘ayn al-qalb*), which alone sees with the vision of gnosis.” Due to the fallen consciousness which attaches itself to what is transitory, human beings do not see things as they are but rather in a distorted way: “Therefore union with this (world) is separation from that (world): the health of this body is the sickness of the spirit. Hard is the separation from this transitory abode: know, then, that the separation from

that permanent abode is harder.” According to Rūmī, the fallen consciousness of Adam extends and includes the whole of humanity:

Sick, surely, and ill-savored is the heart that knows not (cannot distinguish) the taste of this and that. When the heart becomes whole (is healed of pain and disease), it will recognize the flavor of falsehood and truth [since “God taught Adam the Names”]. When Adam’s greed for the wheat [the forbidden fruit] waxed great, it robbed Adam’s heart of health ...discernment flees from one that is drunken with vain desire.

The loss of the sense of the sacred is itself the forgetting of the Divine. Rūmī asserts, “Forgetfulness (of God), O beloved, is the pillar (prop) of this world; (spiritual) intelligence is a bane to this world.”

Sufism teaches that Universal or Perfect Man (*al-insān al-Kāmil*) is the prototype of both the microcosm and the macrocosm, the human being and the cosmos. This is to say that Universal or Perfect Man is “the perfect human model who has attained all the possibilities inherent in the human state.” For Universal or Perfect Man the misidentification with the empirical ego has relinquished itself, “the human ego with which most men identify themselves is no more than his outer shell”. Chittick explains the need for consciousness to be in ceaseless contemplation of the Real in order to remedy the forgetfulness of the Divine: “the maintenance of the world depends on the balance between the contemplative who has realized the state of Universal Man, and fallen man, who lives in a state of forgetfulness.” The

theomorphic identity of all human beings is the Universal or Perfect Man as Rūmī instructs:

The owner of the Heart [Universal or Perfect Man] becomes a six-faced mirror: through him God looks upon (all) the six directions. Whosoever hath his dwelling place in (the world of) the six directions, God doth not look upon him except through the mediation of him (the owner of the Heart)... Without him God does not bestow bounty on any one.

Rūmī reminds readers that the original function of every human being is to be the Universal or Perfect Man in order to act as a channel of grace in the world. In fact, not to do so, is to forfeit what it means to be human:

There is one thing in this world which must never be forgotten. If you were to forget everything else, but did not forget that, then there would be no cause to worry; whereas if you performed and remembered and did not forget every single thing, but forgot that one thing, then you would have done nothing whatsoever.

The saints and sages of the world’s religions remind the human collectivity of his or her original or theomorphic nature and provide methods of realizing this transpersonal identity:

In the composition of man all sciences were originally commingled, so that his spirit might show forth all hidden things, as limpid water shows forth all that is under it—pebbles, broken shards, and the like—and all that is above it, reflecting in the substance of the water. Such is its nature, without treatment or training. But when it was mingled with earth or other colors [when Adam fell], that property and that knowledge was parted from it and forgotten by it. Then God

most High sent forth prophets and saints, like a great, limpid water such as delivers out of darkness and accidental coloration every mean and dark water that enters into it. Then it remembers; when the soul of man sees itself unsullied, it knows for sure that so it was in the beginning, pure, and it knows that those shadows and colors were mere accidents.

Identity itself belongs to the Divine and thus the mystery of human identity cannot be resolved without the inclusion of what transcends the empirical ego. Rūmī astutely writes: “The idol of your self is the mother of (all) idols...”

Whether the human being chooses to do good actions or evil ones, all creation confirms the existence of the Absolute. Rūmī writes, “...(both) infidelity and faith are bearing witness (to Him): both are bowing down in worship before His Lordliness.” The secret of the Prophetic Tradition that affirms “Die before ye die” is a call for self-effacement before the Divine in order to be reabsorbed in the Divine. Rūmī states that ultimately death in this life is an alchemical process of spiritual transformation; it is a journey of homecoming and not of departure in order to return to the Supreme Identity:

O you who possess sincerity, (if) you want that (Reality) unveiled, choose death and tear off the veil [of your self-existence]—

Not such a death that you will go into the grave, (but) a death consisting of (spiritual) transformation.

Rūmī casts light on the famous, yet no less controversial dictum by the great Sufi mystic al-Hallāj (858-922), which is an instruction on how to approach the Divine:

Take the famous utterance “I am God.” Some men reckon it a great pretension; but “I am God” is in fact a great humility. The man who says “I am the servant of God” asserts that two exist, one himself and the other God. But he who says “I am God” has naughted himself and cast himself to the winds. He says, “I am God”: that is, “I am not, He is all, nothing has existence but God, I am pure nonentity, I am nothing.” In this the humility is greater.

The deepening of our understanding of the mystical dimension of the religions will aid in creating more spiritual literacy across the faith traditions and will simultaneously revive the meaning and significance of the outer or formalistic dimension of religion. For Rūmī and all saints and sages of the sapiential traditions are upholding the right understanding of their own faith traditions and how to approach them accordingly. The *shahādah* or the essential declaration of faith in Islam, *Lā ilāha illallāh*, “There is no god but God,” when seen through the discerning and contemplative “eye of the heart” becomes a crystalline distillation of Rūmī’s metaphysical teachings. Two main steps on the Path are contained in the *shahādah*, the first consisting of the “annihilation of self” (*fanā*) and the second the “subsistence in God” (*baqā*), for when the illusory nature of human identity dissociated from the Divine reality is seen for what it is and it becomes evident that the Divine is all that exists, concentration on the Real becomes possible. This formula can also be understood as “There is no self but the Self” or, correspondingly,

“There is no reality but the Reality,” being universal in principle and applicable to all faiths.

As the centuries pass, Rūmī continues to demonstrate his profound presence in the hearts and minds of those who are attracted to his message, which calls for nothing less than a re-sacrilization of this world and union with the Divine. The importance of this book is that it guides readers through the fundamental themes of Rūmī’s complex spiritual labyrinth, making his symbolic language intelligible to readers unfamiliar with his teachings or the mystical dimension of Islam. It is truly remarkable to find the timeless in time; and it is not only through Rūmī but all of the saints and sages of the world’s faith traditions where such examples of pure metaphysics can be found, urging a resurgence of the sacred that is ever-present in this very moment. We conclude with two lines from Rūmī’s *Dīwān* inviting all to take part in the pilgrimage of the Heart: “Make a journey out of self into [your real] self, O master, / For by such a journey earth becomes a quarry of gold.”

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos is a practicing psychotherapist who has worked for a number of years in the field of mental health and social services. His focus of interest is comparative religion and the interface between spirituality and psychology. His works include *BEHAVIORISM: THE QUANDARY OF A PSYCHOLOGY WITHOUT A SOUL* and he is the editor of *PSYCHOLOGY AND THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY*.