

Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective

Sefik Can (ed. and trans. by Zeki Saritoprak)
New Jersey: The Light, 2004. 317 pages.

Is there room on the shelf for another book about Jalal al-Din Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystic of Persia? Considering the great depth of his genius, the answer has to be yes. Sefik Can's *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought* is one of the latest books on the subject, and is distinguished from others in that its author is the current head of the Mevlevi order, the Sufi order established after Rumi's death and based on his teachings. In his biography, the author is introduced as "the most authoritative spiritual figure of the Order" and "the latest living *Mesnevihan* (*Mesnevi* reciter) who received his *ijazah* (special certificate in the recitation of the *Mesnevi*) from his spiritual master Tahir al-Mevlevi."

This book thus reflects the Mevlevi tradition as it is understood within its Turkish milieu today. Neatly organized into four chapters, it deals with the political and historical background of Anatolia during Rumi's lifetime (chapter 1), "Rumi's Personality and Views" (chapter 2), his influence (chapter 3), and "Rumi's Sufi Order and His Approach to Orders" (chapter 4). A short bibliography and an index are also provided.

Throughout many passages, one can feel the author's love and compassion for Rumi. His sincerity and enthusiasm compel one to set aside academic concerns over historical accuracy and critical analysis in order to view Rumi from a Mevlevi perspective. The book offers insight into a living devotional approach to Rumi that often translates into an uplifting joy, which is the hallmark of Rumi's poems and which has animated the life of many of his devotees. The reader will benefit from the relevant spiritual insights offered. The section entitled "Beauty" is a good example of explaining Rumi's views and relating them to contemporary experiences. The author writes:

According to Rumi, beauty takes us from ourselves, frees us from the prison of the body, and brings us closer to another realm, to God. Thus we find God within the impact of the fine arts on sensitive people. (p. 191)

The heart of this book is chapter 2, which features the author's interpretations of Rumi's personality and views (pp. 97-246). Although a small portion of this chapter is devoted to Rumi's life and characteristics, most of it

deals with such issues as asceticism and ecstasy, love, belief and disbelief, salvation, reason, beauty, poetry, music and whirling ceremonies, sorrow, free will, and reincarnation. The section subtitled “Women” immediately catches one’s eye, because it is rare to find an exposition of this topic in studies on Rumi. However, there are no groundbreaking interpretations here, only conventional and apologetic explanations of Rumi’s views. The author generalizes Rumi’s views by explaining the differences between the sexes through a recourse to scientific “facts,” then compares the improved status of women in Islam to other religions and societies. A questionable saying of Prophet Muhammad is left without a footnote reference: “There is no doubt that women are counterparts, similar, and equivalent to men.”

Mentioning a few degrading stories about women in the *Mesnevi*, he notes that Rumi’s goal is not to belittle women, but to point out that women are created with more sensitivity than men so that human beings could multiply and populate Earth:

God has put more love and affection into women’s hearts than into the hearts of men. God has created women with this nature so that they may endure the difficulty of childbirth and motherhood. (p. 198)

All in all, there is a far greater depth to the mystical importance of Rumi’s views of women and sexuality than is apparent in this brief section.

A distinguishing strength of this book is its refusal to betray the truth of Rumi as a Muslim and a Sufi. It is a common error of many irresponsible expositions of Rumi’s views and ideas to remove him from his Islamic context, as if he were somehow an exception to the norm. Rumi is one of the better-known figures of a Sufi tradition that emulates the Prophet’s example. This is a prophetic tradition of embodying sincerity, compassion, and the wisdom of inner meanings even as it uncompromisingly defends Islam’s principles and diligently upholds its external forms.

From all indications in this book, Sefik Can himself is a good representative of this tradition. At opportune moments in the book, he is quick to point out that the message of transcendent love, acceptance, and diversity, which characterize Sufism in general and Rumi in particular, are products of Islamic civilization and reflective of Islam’s true essence. He writes:

In this book, I have tried to explain Rumi’s views on various issues with examples from his works so that one does not have the impression that his holiness has brought new, innovative ideas to religion. This great saint ... cannot be outside of the Muhammadi path. (p. 194)

Scholars of contemporary expressions of Sufism should find this book very interesting. Contrary to its back-cover endorsement that promises an “astonishing” level of engagement with all of the classical Persian sources, this engagement is kept to a bare minimum. This book remains a devotional work. True to its subtitle, it is “A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective.” On a more academic note, the author has a somewhat uncritical approach to historical sources or facts of common knowledge. For example, Khorasan is not “a city in modern Iran” – it is a province. The bibliography is meager, the editorial work rather careless, and the translator has kept the Turkish spellings, thereby saddling the reader with the task of deciphering many names and terms that have traveled from Arabic to Persian to Turkish and then to English. The reader might be well advised to read the epilogue first, where the author humbly refers the reader back to Rumi, whom he describes as: “This great person that we love, this great saint whose ideas we cannot quite understand, this sultan of lovers of God.”

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All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School

Loukia K. Sarroub

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 158 pages.

In her book, Loukia Sarroub offers an ethnographic account of the lives of six Yemeni-American girls by following them through public schools from 1997-2002 to “obtain a deeper and richer understanding of their day-to-day lives at home and at school” (p. 19). By observing them in the school, home, malls, and mosque, as well as at their community’s social occasions, Sarroub investigates the tensions between their lives and identities in the American public school system and their family lives at home, both in the United States and in Yemen, their land of origin.

In the first chapter, Sarroub details the theories behind her ethnographic research, introduces the research background, reviews the research methodology, and gives an overview of the participants. In chapter 2, she chooses Layla, one of the Yemeni-American girls, as a representative of the group. As Sarroub explains, Layla struggled to find a space for herself, because “it was not always clear to her whether she was