Rūmī's Antinomian Poetic Philosophy

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Abstract

Western reception of Rūmī in the last few decades is intriguing, as he is commonly considered a gentle Muslim, different from other sages that Islamic culture produced. Rūmī's otherness is often based on his powerful and peerless poetry, deploying rich wine imagery, homoerotic love metaphors, and an emphasis on the superiority of the heart and spiritual growth, and dismissing the outward and orthodox tenets. This paper argues that Rūmī belongs to a millennium-old Persian Sufism, and these poetic tropes derive from a firm antinomian tradition, functioning as strong metaphors to express religious piety by transcending all temporal dualities such as unbelief and belief, the profane and the sacred, purity and impurity, and so forth.

Keywords


So long as Madrasa and minaret are not destroyed,
The Qalandarī accoutrements will not be in order.
So long as belief has not turned into disbelief and disbelief into belief, 
A servant of God will not truly be a Muslim.1

1 Introduction2

The antinomian motifs in Rūmī’s oeuvre have created confusion about his piety, both during his life and in his modern reception history. Ever since Rūmī became a best-selling poet in the US and Canada back in the 1980s, Western media have been giving considerable attention to this Persian Sufi sage. My colleagues Alan Williams and Fatemeh Keshavarz, and the Iranian translator Shahram Shiva participated in a BBC discussion about Rūmī in 2015.3 During the discussion, the BBC moderator Ernie Rea said of Rūmī, ‘He seems to offer


‘Until the mosque and minaret are laid to waste
Never will the qalandar’s state of spirit prosper.
Not until faith becomes infidelity, infidelity faith,
In truth, there’ll be not one true Muslim devotee.’

2 This essay is part of some ongoing research I have conducted in recent years. I would like to express my gratitude to all participants of the following conferences, especially Leonard Lewisohn, Alan Williams, Ahmet Karamustafa, Mohammad-Reza Shafiʿi-Kadkani, Nasrollah Pourjavady, and Rokus de Groot, who generously shared their perceptive ideas and original thoughts on the topic during these conferences: Antinomian Movements in Islam (June 2015); Prince of Physicians: Avicenna’s Legacy in the Islamic World and the West (January 2012); and The Wise Fool: Asceticism on the Cross-Roads of Islam and Christianity (February 2010).

3 See ‘Beyond Belief: Rumi’, BBC Radio 4 (Broadcast 7 September 2015): https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b068tsvj (accessed 5 July 2018). The host was Ernie Rea. The participants were Professor Fatemeh Keshavarz (Director of the Roshan Institute for Persian Studies at the University of Maryland), Alan Williams (Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester, UK), and Shahram Shiva (Rūmī translator and writer).
a gentle, loving version of Islam, while Shiva firmly held that Rūmī writes for all people and goes beyond any religions, emphasizing that Rūmī repeats ideas such as ‘God is not found in any mosque’, and implying that he is criticizing Islam. Such discussions arise in part from Rūmī’s use of antinomian tropes, which Shiva misinterpreted as un-Islamic, without considering at all that these were simply part and parcel of the venerable tradition of antinomian piety in Persian Sufi mysticism. Williams and Keshavarz, both acclaimed Rūmī specialists, tried in vain to convince Shiva that Rūmī’s entire poetic universe is Islamic, as evidenced in his innumerable citations of the Qurʾān and Hadith. Surely, it is not without reason that Rūmī’s usage of such tropes reveals him to be a poet and mystic weary of Islam and fleeing from its formalities, ritual duties, and institutions such as the mosque, or that he presents an atypically gentle version of Islam. Rūmī’s antinomian ideas about religion generated stories in Persian literature even in medieval times. Some orthodox Muslims even doubted Rūmī’s faith. One of these stories occurs in the hagiographical account of Sufi saints Nafaḥāt al-uns by the prolific Persian Sufi master and poet ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (1414–1492), which reads as follows:

Mawlānā Sirāj al-Dīn Qūnyawī possessed high status and was a great man of his time, but he was unhappy with Rūmī. People reported to him that Rūmī had said: ‘I am one with seventy-three creeds.’ As Qūnyawī had [ill] intentions, he wanted to hurt and vilify Rūmī. He sent one of his close friends, who was a great scholar, to Rūmī’s public preaching assembly, saying: ‘Ask him, “Did you say such and such?” If he confesses, you should hurl invectives, cast aspersions on him and offend him.” The man came and publicly asked Rūmī: ‘Did you say in fact that “I am one with seventy-three creeds”?’ Rūmī answered: ‘I did.’ The man loosened his tongue and started to hurl insults and slurs at him. Rūmī laughed and said: ‘I am also one with all that you are saying now.’ The man became ashamed of himself and turned away.

In recent years, such anecdotes have been increasingly used to depict how Rūmī differs from other medieval Muslim sages, as if he were a unique humanist in Islamic intellectual history. Rūmī is being introduced as an ambassador of Islam in the Western world at a time in which deviant ideologies, manifested under the flag of Islam, are being criticized in many Islamophobic media outlets. Rūmī is the personification of a different version of Islam, centring on love and humanism, which could co-exist harmoniously with Western Judeo-Christian tradition. While, of course, he is unique in his personality, his religious aspirations, and poetic genius, he can also be placed in a long line of Persian mystics who inspired and invited people to the Sufi Path and spiritual

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7 This alludes to a prophetic ḥadīth in which the Prophet Mohammad states that his community will be divided into 73 sects and none will find salvation except one group. Discussions on this topic were favourite among mystics and theologians. See, for instance, Muhammad Jawād Mashkūr, Haftād-u sih millat yā i’tiqādāt-i madhāhib: Risāla-i dar firaq-i islām az āthār-i qarn-i hashtum-i hijrī (Tehran: ‘Atā‘ī 1337 A.Hsh./1958), pp. 6–7.

growth. Love and divine love are the key elements in this call, as well as compassion, kind-heartedness, altruism, and humility. As Shahab Ahmed states, the ‘ultimate conceptual and experiential goal [of Sufism] is the freeing of the individual from the bonds of prescriptive authority/orthodoxy – as Rūmī said, “We have become gold and are delivered from the theory and practice of alchemy: we are God’s freemen.’”9 Some of the greatest Persian mystical poets, such as Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), Sanāʾī (d.c. 525/1131), Niẓāmī (d.c. 598/1202), Saʿdī (d. 691/1292), Ḥāfiẓ (c. 715–792/1315–1390), and Jāmī (817–898/1414–1492), to name only the most famous, are part of this tradition.

One reason that Rūmī’s Islam is characterized as a ‘gentle version’ or even as un-Islamic stems from Rūmī’s philosophy of love, which is at the centre of his writings. As we shall see, Rūmī subordinates even holy Islamic laws, rituals, and tenets to the law of love. It might seem that Rūmī even mocks Islamic sacred rituals such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, by referencing ‘the Kaʿba of the heart’ and giving it a higher value than the Kaʿba in Mecca. Rūmī’s frequent use of themes and motifs related to wine and homoeroticism supports this reading, but such themes are part and parcel of the antinomian tradition of paradoxical piety, with roots going back to at least the tenth century, when there was a crisis of piety.10 People were asking: Who is a good Muslim? What are the characteristics of a good Muslim? Is being a good Muslim dependent on genealogy, skin colour, or ascetic abstinence? It was recognized that Islam had introduced the concept of umma (the wider Muslim community), yet there were discussions about who was the more pious Muslim. While the concept of taqwā (piety) was based on the fear of God and abstinence, mystics centred it instead on the love for God, and God’s love for mankind. Other connotations such as ‘uprightness’ and ‘dutifulness’ were also added.11 Mystics pushed their ideas from the periphery to the centre, where ‘ulamāʾ (religious scholars) had positioned themselves. In the course of these debates on piety, a new school came into being, which was called madhhab-i ʿishq (the religion of love).

The purpose of this article is to analyse the antinomian motifs in Rūmī’s ghazals. To my knowledge, no systematic study has been conducted on Rūmī’s poetry and erotic spirituality, and although this short essay cannot do justice

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10 On the rise and decline of various religious movements in Persia see the outstanding study by Wilferd Madelung, Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran (Albany, NY: Bibliotheca Persica 1988).
to his work, I hope to inspire other scholars to undertake a comprehensive analysis of Rūmī’s antinomianism in connection with his popularity in the West.¹²

Scholars of Persian literature and Islamic mysticism have studied the origins of the concept of the ‘religion of love’ and its essential characteristics. Shahab Ahmed convincingly shows that this religion of love was, after the four official madhhab, one of the most influential schools that inspired people in a vast area from the Balkans to Bengal.¹³ This religion of love was developed by mystics such as Ḥusayn Manṣūr Hallāj (executed in 922), Ahmad Ghazālī, Sanāʾī, and ‘Aṭṭār. Rūmī is an heir to this tradition.¹⁴ Sanāʾī and ‘Aṭṭār played enormous roles in Rūmī’s intellectual development. As Rūmī states, Sanāʾī was his ears and ‘Aṭṭār his eyes.¹⁵ Sanāʾī imbued the Persian erotic ghazal, which was mainly used in a courtly context, with a religious layer, and also introduced Qalandārī themes into Persian poetry.¹⁶ Groups known as ‘qaladandarīs’ were wandering vagabonds who rejected the orthodox Islamic laws. The quintessence of Qalandārī thought is that public piety and religiosity are easily earned and thus can lead to hypocrisy, which is an impediment on the spiritual path. The only way to avoid hypocrisy, they maintained, is to hide one’s true faith and piety by transgressing the holiest religious laws, which are so dear to the orthodox religious scholar. Qalandars travelled long distances from city to city exhibiting provocative behaviour. With their overwhelming charisma and passion,
they attracted great attention. The Qalandars provoked the Islamic community by mocking sacred traditions, rituals, and laws. They shaved all bodily hair, which they called chahār darb (the four blows). They would appear naked in public, with nothing more than a few rags around their waist, and stay in bars and brothels, where plenty of wine was served and beautiful young men were present. Although their provocations served to attract criticism and reproach, they believed that this acted as a shield from the temptations of hypocrisy. These Qalandars contrasted themselves with the orthodox religious scholars and the organized Sufis who publicly displayed their piety. There are sketches and paintings of these wandering dervishes, walking half-naked in the desert, sometimes with piercings in their noses, ears, and genitals. The Qalandars wanted to show that they had renounced earthly existence by paying no attention to the external aspects of religion, believing that the outward piety of Islamic jurists, preachers, and the orthodox was false and insincere. True piety could only be attained by hiding one's spiritual aspirations behind a veil of sinful behaviour.


The Qalandars may be a continuation of the Malāmatī Sufis (‘those who incur blame’), although there are big differences. These Malāmatī mystics were extremely pious, but feared that social respect for their piety would distract them from the spiritual path, for instance by causing them to become proud of their saintly status. They therefore avoided distractions by deliberately acting in an impious fashion in order to draw reproach. They would drink wine publicly. As Franklin Lewis remarks, such behaviour would in the long run ‘have the converse effect of making debauchery appear religiously permissible in the pursuit of mystical insight’.21

2 Qalandarī Literary Themes and Motifs in Persian Poetry

Qalandarī themes can be roughly divided into two categories: motifs revolving around love, and those related to wine and wine-drinking. These motifs were repeatedly utilized by Persian poets from the twelfth century onwards (although some allusions can be found in older texts) and became part and parcel of the Persian poetic tradition and other vernacular Persianate literary traditions from the Balkans to Bengal.22

The first group of motifs centre around the behaviour and beliefs of the Qalandar. The word Qalandar can be translated as ‘tramp’ or ‘vagabond’. Two other figures associated with the Qalandarī tradition in Persian poetry and Sufism may be mentioned in this context in particular: the malang23 (‘detached dervish’) and the rind24 (‘inspired libertine’). Metaphors are used to describe how the Qalandars denounce false piety, radically renouncing the world. Other main characteristics are the Qalandars’ debaucheries in public...
and the celebration of wine and drunkenness, which have developed into a complex of motifs in which wine, the act of quaffing it, the dregs, and the cup are all individually described in the most dazzling and detailed fashion. The Qalandars’ appearance in taverns, their guzzling of wine, and their embracing of young boys were all part of their conduct. They sought refuge from the mosque and school in a tavern, which is also called a kharābāt (ruined place), or in other places of ill repute. The mosque and religious seminary college or school (Madrasa), were establishments where ‘ulamāʾ (religious scholars), wuʿʿāẓ (preachers), and fuqahāʾ (jurists of Islamic law) could be found. These institutions represent and are used as symbols in Persian Sufi poetry of a one-dimensional reading of Islam focusing on outward religiosity, while the tavern functions as a symbol of the locality where the inner meaning of religion and true piety can be found. Drunkenness is the Qalandar’s pride, as it reminds him of the moment his soul first met God. The moment of creation is depicted in terms of drunken ecstasy. On the day of alast (‘Am I not your Lord?’), also called the primordial Covenant, the souls of Adam were so captivated by God’s beauty that they answered affirmatively, ‘Yes, we witness, You are!’ Mystic poets emphasize that the word balā (yes) also means ‘affliction’, by which they refer to their suffering in this world, yearning for their soul’s reunion with the Creator.

Another principal motif is related to renouncing Islam and questioning who is a good Muslim. In this context, other religions such as Zoroastrianism and Christianity are praised. If there is no reference to other religions, kufr (unbelief) is mentioned in a positive sense in contrast to being Muslim, by which the poet deprecates conventional piety as hypocrisy. The taverns in Islamic societies were on the periphery of towns, and were frequented by non-Muslims, such as Christians and Zoroastrians. The Qalandar frequented these places, where he would find his spiritual guide, a pīr-i mughān (Magian Elder).

This complex of themes and motifs appeared suddenly in the ghazals of Sanāʾī, who discusses them in detail. We do not know whether Sanāʾī actually witnessed these Qalandars and recorded their behaviour and opinions in his poetry, or whether he created these metaphors, which then inspired people to follow the Qalandar ways. We know that similar but less extreme movements

26 The reference is to this verse in the Qurʾān vii: 172, where God asked Adam, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ (Alastu birabbikum), to which Adam replied ‘Yes’.
28 On which, see Nicholas Bolyston, ‘Reminding Scholars What It Means To Be Muslim: Themes of Religious Identity in the Poetry of Sanāʾī of Ghazna’, in Sufis and Mullahs: Sufis
such as the Malāmatiyya and Karrāmiyya existed from the tenth century. We also know that scholars such as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ghazālī wrote a treatise on antinomianism, warning of the dangers of such aberrant behaviour and wondering why their lifestyle was so attractive to people.29 According to de Bruijn:

[The Qalandarī themes and motifs were] probably no more than a literary ploy of which preachers and mystics availed themselves in their admonitions, but from the thirteenth century onwards the Qalandar is also known as the appellation of a dervish practising extreme forms of ascetism and living in a group of the like-minded.30

While the phenomenon of the Qalandar appears in the works of mystics such as Abū Saʿīd-i Abī Ḥayr (357–440/967–1049) and Bābā Ṭāhir-i ʿUryān (fifth/eleventh century), it was Sanāʾī and later Ṭāṭār who made Qalandars an integral part of Persian mystical poetry.31 Although it is hard to provide evidence of a genuine Qalandarī fellowship in society during the eleventh and the early twelfth centuries, we have evidence of actual Qalandars from the thirteenth century onwards.

3 Qalandars in Rūmī’s Ghazals

Rūmī composed over 3,000 ghazals on diverse subjects, using an unprecedented variety of metres. The mystical ghazal, which started with Sanāʾī in the twelfth century, had developed into a complex poetical form by Rūmī’s era a century later.32 Various literary themes and motifs were ingeniously interwoven...
into individual couplets to convey a thought or idea related to love, both earthly and heavenly. Rūmī's ghazals are rich in erotic love and wine, as well as many philosophical reflections.33 Many of the themes, motifs and metaphors derive from the profane homoerotic poems of court poets from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Although wine and physical homoerotic relationships, even back then, were strongly forbidden in Islam, wine was served in abundance and homoeroticism was in vogue at Persian courts. Persian poetry is a rich repository for stories about gatherings in which wine and love play a central role.34 Persian poets describe these courtly homoerotic love celebrations in detail. The mystics adopted and integrated the courtly erotic tradition into their poetry but added extra religious dimensions to it.

Rūmī's sources of inspiration for the Qalandarī motifs are Sanāʾī and ‘Aṭṭār. But casting a glance at Rūmī’s large collection of ghazals, one cannot easily find the specific Qalandarī references that are an essential part of Sanāʾī’s and ‘Aṭṭār’s ghazals. Sanāʾī, for example, wrote several ghazals rhyming on ‘O boy’ (ay pisar), and Sanāʾī frequently mentions the word ‘Qalandar’ and similar terminology.35 ‘Aṭṭār time and again names the word ‘Qalandar’ and its concomitants. He provokes the orthodox in his ghazals, such as the following, which has been commented upon many times:36

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36 For an extended discussion of the symbolic significance of this ghazal in Persian Sufism, see Leonard Lewisohn, ‘Sufi Symbolism and the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition:'
That ancient Zoroastrian
I am. It's me who raised on high
The idol-house – pagoda – then
Up on its roof I gave a cry,
Declaimed to all the world's folk,
Sounding 'infidelity' abroad:
'O Muslims! Those idols I've rebuilt,
Put varnish on their fusty paint
Again. I'm born again, have wed
My mother as my mate again!


37 ‘Aṭṭār, Dīwān, ed. Tafaḍḍulī, p. 405, ghazal 504. A literal translation reads as follows:
I am the ancient Zoroastrian who has built a temple for idols,
Climbing to its roof, calling to this world:
O Muslims, I call you to the prayer of disbelief,
As I have polished the old idols again.
I became again the partner to the mother who gave birth to me,
I am called a Zoroastrian because I fornicated with my mother.
People call me Jesus because I was born from a virgin mother;
As I fed upon my mother’s milk again.
If people burn the poor ‘Aṭṭār for his Zoroastrianism,
O people! Be my witness, for I have offered myself.
Rūmī usually makes little direct use of the term ‘Qalandar’ and related names in his ghazals, but rather treats the complex of Qalandarī motifs without naming them. Antinomian motifs are so deeply integrated in Rūmī’s philosophy that they are a natural feature of his poetry and opinions. Although Rūmī highlights that Sanāʾī and ʿAṭṭār were his teachers, he apparently wrote no poetry before his meeting with the wandering dervish Shams of Tabriz, whose outward description and mystical orientation seamlessly locates him in the hierarchy of the Qalandarī tradition of his day, and who activated Malāmatī motifs. The charismatic character of Shams has fascinated scholars. Nicholson compares him to Socrates in three respects, ‘strong passions, his poverty, and his violent death’. Shams transformed Rūmī’s life so intensely that, from a theologian, he became a mystic whose feverish longings for union with the divine are expressed in matchless love lyrics. In several of his poems, as in the following quatrain, Rūmī alludes to this change:

بادهم کردی

سجاده نشین با وقارم دیدی
بازیچه و بادمحمودی
سرفته بزم و پادگومنی

38 Although this line is not in Tafaḍḍulī’s edition of the Dīwān, it occurs in many other editions, and is commented upon and cited as being ʿAṭṭār’s by both Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabīlī and Ṣā’in al-Dīn Turka.


41 As cited by Lewis, Rūmī: Past and Present, p. 135.
I was an ascetic; you turned me into a singing poet;  
You made me the instigator of troubles at feasts, languishing for wine.  
You saw me sitting with authority on a prayer mat;  
You made me a toy of the children on the street.42

In this quatrain Rūmī describes the contrast in his life before and after his meeting with Shams. He characterizes himself as an ascetic, a respectable pious man who turns into a poet and even a singer of songs. The respectable theologian and dignified ascetic has here suddenly turned into a person whom children ridicule.

Although in dealing with Persian ghazals one should distinguish of course between the poet's person and his poetic persona, in the case of Rūmī, most of his ghazals are emotional eruptions in which he refers to the lover's qualities that are mostly easily identifiable with Shams as his beloved master. The question is, of course, whether many of these ghazals should be seen as expressing autobiographical testimonies. As these poems do not have specific dates, and social contexts are usually missing, it is problematic to investigate and approach them as potential sources of his autobiography.43 Moreover, these poems oscillate between earthly and heavenly love, and are therefore expressions to lift the reader/listener to a heavenly plain.44 Although the Persian ghazal was usually sung during seances of mystical audition (samā‘), we do not know precisely how Rūmī's individual ghazals were performed and who their audiences/listeners were.45 With this caveat in mind, I would say that Rūmī often addresses Shams in his ghazals as his beloved friend. Their relationship was so intense that Rūmī renounced his own identity and took over the identity of Shams. He often uses ‘Shams’ or similar appellations related to Shams as his own pen name. Without going into their fascinating relationship, it seems that Shams’ appearance as a Qalandarī dervish had an enormous influence on

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44 For an excellent study of Rūmī’s lyrics see Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rūmī* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press 1998), who analyses various levels and perspectives of Rūmī’s ghazals, showing the convoluted nature of these poems.
45 For a study of which, see Amir Artaban Sedaghat, ‘Rūmī’s Verse at the Crossroads of Language and Music’, in this volume of the *Mawlana Rumi Review* [– Ed.].
Rūmī’s ideas on practising Sufism and experiencing Islam. Rūmī’s references to Qalandars cannot therefore always be separated from his relationship with Shams. Although we are not sure which poems were written for Shams, many refer to an aspect of Rūmī’s relationship with this wandering dervish. The following quatrain, for instance, alludes without doubt to Shams:46

آن رند و قلندري نهان آمد فاش در دیده من بجو نشان کی پاش
یا اوقت خدا یاکه فستاد خداش ای مطرب جان.یکی نفّس ما را باش

That rascal with a hidden Qalandar-nature has come into the open;
Seek the sign of the sole of his feet on my eyes
Either he is God or God has sent him;
O Musician of the Soul, be mine for just one moment.

In the following poem, Rūmī describes how he became drunk by the wine a Qalandar, probably Shams, had poured:47

یار شدم یار شدم با غم تو یار شدم
تاکه رسیدم پ‌ترواز همه بیزار شدم (...)
تاکه بدیدم قدحش سرده اوپاش منت
تاکه بدیدم گلّهش پیدل و دستار شدم
تاکه ملنداردی من داد می مِذیل من
رقص کنن. دلق کنن. جانب حفار شدم

I've become a lover, I've become a lover, I've become a lover of your sorrow;
for when I came to you, I became wearied of all else....
When I saw his wine cup, I became the chief of profligates;
When I saw his hat, I lost my heart, I lost my turban.
When my friend, a Qalandar at heart, offered me delightful wine,
I grew drunk: dancing, with my cloak trailing on the ground,
I went towards the vintner.

47 Rūmī, Kulliyāt-i Shams, vol. 3, p. 180 (ghazal 1392, lines 1, 6, 7).
As in many other ghazals, the poet pours out his feverish emotions, showing how rapturous he has become on seeing the beloved. The repetition of the phrase 'I've become a lover', underlines how Rūmī has annihilated his own personal qualities, taking over his beloved’s identity. His headgear (a turban, or dastār), which in medieval times indicated hierarchical positions in society, is tossed away. The poet joyously celebrates losing his social status, falling into a trance as he has lost his heart to the beloved. Such a radical renouncement of the ego, one’s personal identity, and drunkenness neatly correspond to the Qalandari lifestyle espoused (according to contemporary historical records) by Shams.

In the following poem, Rūmî associates his beloved with a Qalandar:48

One drunken with love’s wine has no shame
And this wine of love is priceless ...
O Qalandar! What can we drink [to give us peace]
To unpick these knots, when they can’t be undone? ...
We are the servants of Shams al-Din of Tabriz
Whose sun has no likeness in the sky.

Many of Rūmī’s allusions to Qalandars point to his relationship with Shams; the poet calls Shams a Qalandar, or Shams becomes the speaking persona advising Rūmī, as in the following poem, which I translate in full to show how Rūmī integrates such Qalandari motifs into the poetic fabric of his ghazals:49

48 Rūmī, Kulliyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, pp. 88–89 (ghazal 2758, lines 1, 18, 20).
The hidden robber of the heart repeats to me secretly
Give me your soul, give me your soul – why are you so niggardly?
Be a Qalandar for a moment, be a victorious Qalandar
Be a salamander, be a salamander, step easily into fire.
Step into fire, step into fire, step merrily into our fire,
For fire will treat our friend as if he were in a rose garden.
Don't you know that our thorn is the king of roses?
Don't you know that our heresy is the soul of the Muslim faith?
O giddy head! O giddy head! Go lose your head! Go lose your head!
O Muslims! O Muslims! – Be Muslim! Be Muslim!
O God, you know that the wide plain is more pleasant than the cage
But no owl can bear to live save in a ruin and graveyard.
Now is the soul's season, when the soul swallows the whole sea
What a season! What fraternity! All hail to the season of kingship!
Silence! For it's hidden from none that the fakir has drunk wine
Since divine glory and the lights of God are shining from his face.
This is not the place to analyse the entire poem, but one aspect of the poem that deserves attention is how the poet’s persona advises the audience to behave like a Qalandar, that is, to prove himself a worthy lover, to renounce Islam, and to devote his life to the beloved. It is in kufr, meaning both infidelity and heresy or unbelief, that true Islam is found. The lover should be ready to accept all the dangers and hazards this love entails, even if this love undermines his good reputation and formal religion. Love is like a fire and the lover has to be willing to go into this fire like a salamander.50 Only when the lover is cleansed by the fire of love, can he transcend himself and stand above the limiting predicates of exoteric belief and disbelief, whether of a Muslim or non-Muslim appearance, for it is only at this point that the poet’s exhortation to ‘Be Muslim!’ makes any sense. By referring to such Qalandari behaviour, the poet points to a higher level of piety where sanctimonious, hypocritical appearances of outward faith and piety are all eradicated.

Persian mystics have concocted a plethora of metaphors, anecdotes, and stories to express this idea. One famous story recounts the love of the Sufi Shaykh Ṣanʿān for a Christian girl. In this story, the poet ʿAṭṭār emphasizes the importance of eradicating outward religiosity as well as the essential features of an ideal lover.51 Shaykh Ṣanʿān is a great religious scholar and Sufi master, who lives near the Ka’ba in Mecca, is the key-holder of the House, and has thousands of Sufi disciples. ʿAṭṭār emphasizes the Shaykh’s high religious position in the opening lines. He dreams for several nights that he is worshiping facing Rome. As the dreams keep coming, he decides to go to the Christian realm. After a long journey, he meets a Christian girl and falls deeply in love with her.52 He declares his love to her, but the girl refuses to reciprocate. She


asks him what such a pious ascetic Muslim wants from loving a Christian girl like herself. After a long discussion she proposes four conditions for their union. The Shaykh must drink wine, kneel before idols and images, burn the Qur’ān, and renounce Islam. The Shaykh says that he is willing to drink wine but the other three conditions are a step too far. The girl takes him to a tavern where he drinks old wine with his new love. He becomes heavily drunk and emphatically declares his love to the girl.

Subsequently the Shaykh does accept the other conditions such as burning the Qur’ān, idol worshipping and even renouncing Islam for the sake of love. Even then the girl does not surrender herself, asking the Shaykh to take care of her pigs before she will reciprocate his love. When the Shaykh’s followers come to visit him and try to persuade him to return to Mecca, he hurls stones at them, driving them away. Later the Shaykh’s disciples have a dream in which the prophet Muḥammad promises them that the Shaykh will return to the Sufi Path and the Islamic faith. This soon happens: the Shaykh sets out for Mecca, bringing the girl with him. As is usual in this genre of Sufi stories, the girl converts to Islam, but on the way to Mecca, she dies.

This story is used in the mystical context to convey several lessons. The first question is: what is the spiritual significance of the Shaykh, who possesses the highest religious authority, leaving the House of God and becoming totally captivated by a Christian girl, a heretic? ‘Aṭṭār shows that romantic love internalizes religion and transforms one’s faith into an intimate matter of personal feeling. The Shaykh had achieved everything in religious terms but he had missed out on love. The sort of love that ‘Aṭṭār is referring to is a purgative force that burns everything until only Love itself remains. All outward show – even a show of religious piety – must be eradicated, because as long as any traces of sanctimonious piety remain, love does not show itself. Love’s conditions are far more demanding than those of normative devotional piety, which in Shaykh Ṣan‘ān’s case were based on conventional ascetic forms of exoteric Islam. Love thus appropriately demanded of him that he become a swineherd in a Christian realm, the most humiliating act possible for a Muslim religious scholar.

Yet this is the typical Qalandarī way of practising love: the lover should welcome ill-fame and having a ‘bad name’ (bad-nāmī)! The concept of a ‘bad name’ also points to the distinction between easy and difficult love. In easy love, everything goes according to one’s wishes, personal whims, and passions, whereas difficult love brings shame on the lover. The joys and woes of difficult love cannot be understood by anyone but the lover himself, for they are ultimately a secret between himself and his Beloved. God has called humans to spiritual love, hidden in man’s heart. Realization of such love always involves
much hardship and tribulation. Without acquiring a bad name, it is impossible
to attain unconditional spiritual love, which is the highest mystical station. To
attain union with the beloved, one has to be able to fully identify oneself with
the beloved and efface one's own identity. As Persian poets emphasize, the
lover should remove all colours (rang) in order to be ‘without colour’ (bi-rang)
and become ‘one colour’ (yik rang) with the beloved. The resulting compound
will reveal the obliteration of the lover's identity in the beloved and finally in
Love itself.

In Persian mystical love theories, love devours everything, even the lover
and the beloved themselves. Aḥmad Ghazālī emphasizes time and again how
love destroys everything until only ‘Love’ itself remains. Shaykh Ṣanʿān was
the greatest religious scholar and Sufi master of his time, but his spiritual real-
ization lacked any living experience of love; to obtain that he needed to fully
internalize his devotion to God through undergoing the difficult trials and trib-
ulations of romantic love. Through his experience of earthly love, he learned
how to love God. An inseparable part of this love is the elimination of one's
ego. Love is often depicted as fire that burns away the lover's ego, in such a way
that he accepts the beloved fully and unconditionally.

Qalandari motifs pervade all of Rūmī's lyrical poetry. In some places, Rūmī
applies the term 'Qalandar' to his own heart. His poetic persona in the follow-
ing line exhorts the reader not to go to a tavern:53

ای دل تو مروسوی خرابات هر چند قلندر جهانی
O heart! Do not go to the tavern,
Although you be a Qalandar of world fame.

This association of the Qalandar with the tavern appears several other times in
his poetry, as in the following verses:54

پز و شراب لعل و خرابات و کافی
مملک قلندرست وهملدیر از او بری
گوی قلندر من واین دلپذیر نیست
زیراک آفریده نباشد قلندری

53  Rūmī, Kullīyyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, p. 74 (ghazal 2733, line 5).
54  Rūmī, Kullīyyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, p. 234 (ghazal 3004, lines 1–2).
A feast, ruby wine, the tavern, and heresy
Are the Qalandar’s kingdom yet the Qalandar transcends them.
You say, ‘I am a Qalandar’ but this is not agreeable,
For the Qalandar is uncreated.55

Other Qalandarī poems refer to the mystic’s exertion on the path. In the following poem, Rūmī employs the rhyme fārīgh (the radīf that rhymes being –ār) to enumerate various qualities of a Qalandar. While in Sanāʾī and ‘Aṭṭār’s Qalandariyyāt the poets choose a provocative stance against organized Sufis and the orthodox, Rūmī’s Qalandari poems focus on the Qalandar’s effort to attain the spiritual goal. The word fārīgh means, among other things, ‘free; ceasing from labour, detached, being at ease; free from care; unrestrained’, and his emphasis on the carefree lifestyle of Qalandars merely refers to their outward behaviour. This carefree attitude forms a shield to protect them against hypocrisy so that they remain engaged solely with their spiritual quest.56 Interpreting this ghazal within the context of Sufi love mysticism, Rūmī starts the poem by reiterating that the mystic must be engaged with the beloved at all times. The word kār (work, labour, affair) points to mystic exertion, emphasizing that the mystical quest is an arduous enterprise, during which the mystic could not be inattentive to his goal even for a moment. Rūmī compares the Qalandar to an industrious ant who gathers provisions.57 The reward for the ant is that it grows into a Solomon.58 Rūmī then compares the Qalandar to an ocean, which is at times busily teeming with waves and at times calm and serene, yet never stops being generous, incessantly offering all it has to creatures. The ocean is of course the locality for the mystic’s epiphany. He must dive into the sea, going into the depths of the waters to find the peerless pearl, a symbol for the mystic secret. In his sea imagery, Rūmī is apparently following Sanāʾī, who in his Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa (The Garden of the Truth) employs a similar maritime metaphor:59

55 That is to say, the Qalandar’s mystical state transcends temporal being (time, place, and circumstance). This verse paraphrased the renowned adage: Al-ṣūfī ghayruʾl-makhlūq (The Sufi is uncreated). On which, see Bāqir Ṣadrīniyā, Farhang-i māthūrāt-i mutūn-i ʿirfānī (Tehran: Surūsh 1380 A.Hsh./2001), p. 301.
58 See Qur’ān, xxvii: 18–19.
Know that although the ship is loaded fully with desires
the place of the seeker of the pearl is the depth of the ocean.
When travelling on dry land, go by horse or donkey;
When you arrive at the ocean, use your head as a stepping stone.
When the ocean grants him admission, the seeker of the pearl
should always use his soul and head as footwear.
The journey to the sea should be undertaken by the head;
learn from your own shadow.

While the mystic is on the boat, the ocean should grant him audience (bār). So
both the captain and the ocean are ready to receive the mystic, but the mystic
should dare to embark on the perilous journey. While true Qalandars are in the
middle of the ocean, others are idly on the land, dreaming of the sea journey.
In the following ghazal, Šams implicitly refers to the contrast between the easy
and safe stay on land, the realm of the intellect and reason, and the risky jour-
ney on the ocean, the realm of love and spiritual illumination:60

Let me not be free from labour one moment,
For the carefree man becomes sorrowful.
When he becomes carefree, sorrow will deride him;
O friend! May no one be without care.
Although the Qalandar appears to be carefree,
He is not in his inmost secret heart at all carefree.
From the beginning, he suffers many a thorn,
Till he becomes all a rose, free from thorns,
Just like the ant who stores up grains,
Who, becoming Solomon, is needless of any store;
Just like the ocean, tranquil yet tempestuous;
All receive benefits from its blithe generosity.
A Qalandar is the one who sits in the boat,
Speeding on his way, but careless how he fares.
Perplexed, you will see many on this road,
Without care for the boat and the sea's granting audience.
With drunken fantasies of the ocean, the boat but foolish conjecture
For them, look how many idiots are idly sitting by.
4  The Kaʿba as a Barrier for Piety

Another favourite Qalandarī motif in Rūmī’s poetry revolves around the Muslim ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, visiting the House of God (Kaʿba). According to antinomian mystical convictions, sacred Islamic places, including the Kaʿba, have no value. What matters is worshipping and loving God himself. The Kaʿba is a symbol of the outward religious experience while the heart is the sanctuary of the inward. As an outward symbol, the Kaʿba may distract the lover from his contemplation of the beloved. This is why Persian mystics often deride the Kaʿba as being merely a building made of water and clay. A distinction is thus often made between the kaʿba-yi ġil (Kaʿba of clay) and the kaʿba-yi dil (Kaʿba of the heart). In this respect, the Sufis often cite the Ḥadīth qudsī (prophetic tradition in which the speaker is God) to emphasize the superior quality of the heart, such as the following: ‘Neither heaven nor My earth contain Me, but the heart of my believing servant does contain Me.’61 Worshipping at the Kaʿba reminds the mystic of the pagan Arab ritual of worshipping the idols that were kept inside the House. Mystics told many anecdotes to display their disapproval of worshipping the outward house, because a physical journey to the Kaʿba was a mark of hypocrisy.62 The great Sufi Shiblī (d. 946) ran with a torch in his hand to set the Kaʿba on fire. When people asked him about his motivation, he replied that people were so occupied with worshipping the House, they had forgotten the Owner.63

The Kaʿba was pictured as a bride wearing the astār (black veil), waiting for her lover, the black stone being the beauty spot on her face and the door-ring her curly locks.64 If the House were to distract the mystic lover from the Owner of the House, the lover would be worshipping in two directions, an act of polytheism. These mystics were so afraid of the slightest diversion from God, which would impair their piety, that they rejected even the holiest Islamic site, loved and venerated by Muslims. Although such condemnations of the House and


the pilgrimage were intentionally provocative, they served as effective metaphors to emphasize how easily one can fall into hypocrisy, so as to remind Muslims that true piety lies within the heart.

In Shams's *maqālāt* (discourses), there is an anecdote about a man who wants to buy a mill. Shams tells him to give the money intended for the purchase of the mill to Shams, who will then turn round him like a mill, and so give the man wheat of the spirit beyond all material measure and estimation.65 Rūmī tells a similar story in the second book of his *Mathnawī* about the great mystic Bāyazīd from Bištām (d. 234/848 or 261/875) and relates this to the Ḥajj.66 On his way to Mecca, Bāyazīd meets a wandering dervish who asks him where he is going. He replies that he is going to the House of God, at which the dervish asks what kind of provisions he carries. Bāyazīd replies that he has two hundred silver coins. The dervish says: "Circumambulate seven times around me and consider this act more valuable than the ritual performed around the House of God."67 Subsequently, the dervish asks him to leave his money behind, for his wish to go to Mecca has already been fulfilled.68

\[
\text{کعب هرچندی که خانه‌ی پرّ اوست}
\]
\[
\text{خلقت من نیز خانه‌ی سیرّ اوست}
\]
\[
\text{تا بکرد آن خانه‌ی را در وی نفت}
\]
\[
\text{واندرین خانه‌به جز این حی نفت}
\]
\[
\text{چون مرا دیدی خدا را دیده‌ای}
\]
\[
\text{گرد کعبة صدق بر گردیده‌ای}
\]
\[
\text{خدمت من طاعت و حمد خداست}
\]
\[
\text{تا نندازی که حق از من بسیاست}
\]
\[
\text{چشم نبکو بازکن در من نگر}
\]
\[
\text{تا بینی نور حق اندر بشر}
\]

Although the Ka‘ba is the House of His religious service, 
The creation of me is also the House of his secrets.69
Since God has made the Ka‘ba, He has not gone into it, 
While no one except the Living has entered in my house [heart].
When you see me, you have seen God; 
You have circled round the Ka‘ba of sincerity.
To serve me is to obey and glorify God:
Beware, do not think that God is separate from me.
Open your seeing eyes and gaze on me,
That you may see the Light of God in man.

For Persian mystics, love has a prominent place, even higher than religious 
tenets and rituals. Rūmī writes:70

Perhaps the most famous of Rūmī’s poems on pilgrimage is the following, 
which has been sung by several artists in the Persian-speaking world in recent 
times. The ghazal’s message is typically antinomian, advising the reader not 
to go to the House of God, as the beloved is in one’s heart. Fatemeh Keshavarz

rightly says that this ghazal is an example showing how Rūmī distances himself from convention and moves ‘in the direction of closeness and personal contact’. It is indeed due to this intimacy and plain language that after seven hundred years, Persian-speaking people still read such ghazals and apply them to their personal situations. As in his other poems on the Ka’ba, Rūmī’s Sufi message is aimed at concentrating the heart, yet such ghazals have often been used in international political contexts, as indeed they are today: this ghazal was recently cited by an Iranian politician exhorting citizens not to go to Saudi Arabia due to current political tensions between the two countries. The air of antinomianism and the emphasis on philanthropy may easily convince some readers that such ghazals are literally opposed to the performance of the Muslim rite of pilgrimage to Mecca.

For a discussion of this ghazal see Keshavarz, Reading Mystical Lyric, p. 158.

Pilgrims On The Way! Where are you? 
Here is the beloved, here! 
Your beloved lives next door 
wall to wall 
why do you wander 
round and round the desert? 
If you look into the face of Love 
and not just at its superficial form 
You yourselves become the house of God 
and are its lords

Ten times 
you trod the trek unto that house 
For once 
come into this house 
climb onto this roof 
That sweet house of sanctity – 
you have described its features in detail 
but now give me some indication 
of the features of its Lord 
If you have seen that garden, 
where is your bouquet of souvenirs? 
If you are from God’s sea, 
where is your mother pearl of soul?

And yet, may all your troubles 
bring you treasure! 
Too bad that you yourselves are veiling 
the treasures hid within

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73 This is a poetic and accurate translation of the poem by Franklin D. Lewis in *Rumi: Swallowing the Sun: Poems Translated from the Persian* (Oxford: Oneworld 2008), p. 26. My literal translation runs as follows:
Where are you, where are you, you pilgrims returned? 
The beloved is here, so come back, come back. 
Your beloved is your neighbour, you share one wall, 
What are you searching for, lost in the desert? 
If you could see the beloved’s formless face 
You’d realize you are the Lord, the house, and the Ka’ba. 
Ten times you went on that road to the House, 
Come once from this house to the roof. 
That house is subtle, you spoke of its features.
In the following ghazal, the outward pilgrimage to Mecca is associated with reason and intellectual ratiocination (ʿaql), which Rūmī and other Sufis contrast with love. The domain of reason is limited to this world, whereas love goes beyond all boundaries. The poem teaches the renunciation of reason and utter reliance on love, enumerating several contrasting features of love and reason. While reason is still entangled in deliberations and pondering, love has already reached the spiritual destination:74

May no intellectual ever remain among the lovers!
Especially when it’s love of one in this red-ruby gown
May the intellectuals stay far from the lovers!
May the reek of the furnace be far from the Zephyr!
If a man of intellect come by, tell him, ‘no entrance!’
And if a lover comes, say, ‘a hundred times, welcome!’

The House of God has become a transparent, even a cliché topos in Rūmī’s poetry, referring to his relationship with his beloved, indicating his constancy, piety, and absolute devotion. In a few references, the beloved is put on an equal footing with the House of God, and Rūmī depicts himself as a mad pilgrim walking devotedly around the beloved. Such references show Rūmī’s feverish longing for the beloved, which is emphasized both through such imagery and in the poem’s rhythm, the internal rhyme in each hemistich, and the final

Show the signs of the Lord of that house.
If you’ve seen the garden, where is your bouquet of roses?
If you are from God’s ocean, where is the pearl of your soul?
Despite all this, may your exertions yield your treasure;
Alas that you are the veil over your own treasure.

Rūmī, Kulliyāt-i Shams, vol. 1, p. 103 (ghazal 172, lines 1–3).
rhyme *tawāf* (‘walking around’), the formal lexicon used for the circumambulation of pilgrims during their Ḥajj (pilgrimage to the Ka'ba):75

You are the Ka’ba of the souls, I will revolve round you.
I am not an owl in the ruin, not knowing how to circle round.
I have no other occupation, no other job but this:
Like the spheres, my task is to circle round day and night,
Who is a better beloved? What work is better than this?
Than prostrating before my idol, circling round my love?

... When I prostrate myself, I am released from existence,
The Ka’ba will intercede for me as I start circling round.
How many times does a reasonable pilgrim circle round? Seven, seven!
I am a demented pilgrim, I do not count my circling round.

Like other Persian mystics, Rūmī often looks askance at the rite of pilgrimage to the outward Ka’ba. Conventional pilgrims are sometimes called ‘worshippers of stones’ (*sang-parastān*) by Rūmī, and he asks them to turn their faces to mystics such as Rūmī himself:76

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As the Ka'ba is full of worshippers of stones,
Turn your face towards us, for this is the Qibla of God.

In the following couplet, Rūmī advises his readers to circumambulate their heart instead of going to Mecca:77

Circle round the Ka'ba of the heart, if you have a heart;
Your heart is the real Ka'ba, why do you think it's but mudbrick?

In the next couplet of the same ghazal, the rites of circumambulation and pilgrimage to the Ka'ba are said to have a specifically moral purpose: to win hearts. By ‘winning hearts’ he means creating friendships and cultivating love relationships, so as to better understand one’s fellow human beings. In the deepest spiritual sense, Rūmī argues here that winning the heart of one single person is ultimately more important in the eyes of God than the formal pilgrimage to Mecca by which one may attain the rank of ‘being a pilgrim’ (Ḥājjī):78

God asks you to go on a pilgrimage to the physical Ka’ba
So that through that act you may conquer and win one heart.

In couplet three of the same ghazal, Rūmī warns the pilgrims not to hurt or break another person’s heart, for if they do, their pilgrimage cannot be accepted:79

Though you may circle round the Ka’ba a thousand times on foot,
God will not accept your pilgrimage if you hurt one single heart.

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77 Rūmī, Kulliyyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, p. 298 (ghazal 3104, line 1).
78 Rūmī, Kulliyyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, p. 298 (ghazal 3104, line 2).
79 Rūmī, Kulliyyāt-i Shams, vol. 6, p. 298 (ghazal 3104, line 3).
According to Rūmî, the truest pilgrimage is that which is internal to man, in the hierocosmos of the heart, compared to which the outer pilgrimage is of secondary importance. In one verse he even speaks of the Ka'ba itself as coming to visit the realized Sufi. This reminds me of Ḥāṭṭār’s report about the female mystic Rabi’ā al-ʿAdawīyya (d. 801), who set out for Mecca, but in the desert saw the Ka’ba coming to meet her. ‘Rabi’ā said: “I crave for the Owner of the House. What should I do with the House? I crave for [God’s promise,] ‘whoever approaches me by a hand’s span, I will approach him by an arm’s span.’ Why should I look at the Ka’ba? I cannot have the Ka’ba, why should I be happy with its beauty?” Rūmî’s allusion to the Ka’ba circumambulating the mystic is apparently based on such reports about the high spiritual status of the Sufi, in which materiality, even of the House of God, become secondary:

Pious believers fare through the desert dawn and dusk, While the Ka’ba hastens to visit you.

One finds exactly the same doctrine in the great Sufi theologian known as the ‘Proof of Islam’ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who distinguished between two types of travellers: those who physically travel to the Ka’ba and those who experience the journey in their hearts (saḥār-i bāṭin saḥār-i dil-ast). While the former reach the Ka’ba and walk seven times around the House, the latter are visited by the Ka’ba, which circles the mystic seven times.

5 Conclusion

Rūmî’s antinomian philosophy is deeply rooted in the Persian poetic and Islamic Sufi tradition. Rūmî did not invent the Qalandarī themes and motifs but he contributed immeasurably to this tradition. Contemporary Western readings of Rūmî as a non-Muslim or as a rare example of a gentle version of Islam relate largely to the non-institutionalized religiosity and spirituality that

80 Ḥāṭṭār, Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ, ed. Isti’lāmī, p. 63.
have sprung up in secular Western society over the last few decades. Rūmī’s antinomian religious ideas thus make a perfect fit for people who have turned their backs on orthodox religion, wishing to push the centre to the extreme periphery or to reject it altogether. Although like very many other Persian Sufis, Rūmī transgresses Islamic laws to create a new definition of piety, such transgressions do not mean that he has denounced Islam or that he equates all religions as equally valid. Using wine, homoerotic love, and other things forbidden by orthodox Islamic law, Persian mystics brought doctrines that lay at the periphery of Shari‘a-oriented Islam into the centre of religiosity. These transgressions complement but do not necessarily contradict the existing laws and doctrines of Islam. As Jenks states, transgression is ‘a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation’.83

Persian poets, including Rūmī, relied heavily on Qalandarī motifs and themes in their poetry, which allowed them to create a higher space of ambiguity where all types of esoteric realities could be discussed and elaborated in purely symbolic terms. In several poems, such as the one below, the poet exhibits how he transgresses the boundaries to create new room for piety and union with the beloved, going beyond limiting concepts such as belief and unbelief:84

Outside Islam and unbelief, there is a plain,
In the midst of this space we have longed for love.
When the mystic arrives here, he lays down his head,
As here there is no place for either Islam or unbelief.85


85 See also Rūmī, *The Quatrains of Rūmī*, trans. Gamard and Farhadi, p. 407. It is interesting to note that such quatrains have been crudely exploited by the novelist Khaled Hosseini and the Hollywood star Brad Pitt, who tattooed the following (mis-)translation of the poem onto his arm, to characterize Rūmī’s religious ideas: ‘There exists a field, beyond all notions of right and wrong. I will meet you there’, which is probably based on Khaled Hosseini’s dedication in his book *And the Mountains Echoed*: ‘Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right doing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.’ For an analysis of this poem and
In such a space, all dualities are removed. The space itself becomes the site of ambiguity, a poetic trope in which the All, the Infinite, can be contained. ‘He lays down his head’ (sar rā binahad, literally ‘placing one’s head’) points to the realized gnostic or mystic (ʿārif) relinquishing the limitations of his ratio-cinative intellectual faculty, which as part of the Whole can never fathom the Whole. Even the imagination falls short in its attempt to imagine the Whole.

The phrase also alludes to the mystic’s radical submission, going beyond anything he can imagine. By transgressing the conservative boundaries of exoteric religious convention, mystics created ambiguities within familiar polarities: the centre and periphery (exemplified by jurists and wandering mystics respectively), the profane and the sacred, good and evil, purity and impurity, and so forth. These ambiguities allowed the Sufi poets to emphasize that such dichotomies are not absolute, but rather paradoxes to be deeply contemplated and reflected on. They thereby highlighted the complexity of the ideas framing the specific exoteric laws, tenets, and precepts of Islam. In fact, the dualities are required to create the paradox that creates an epistemological space wide enough to then remove and transcend all temporal dualities. Moreover, in the above quatrain the word ṣahrā, translated here as ‘plain’, may also mean ‘desert’, which is often the locality where the mystic finds illumination.86 In the following quatrain, Rūmī names several dualities, but these become secondary and even trivial when the mystic lover reaches his destination.87

On the path of Oneness, what is the difference between obedience and sin?

In the tavern lane, what is the difference between a beggar and a king?

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What does it matter if the face of the Qalandar be light or dark? On the highest turret of heaven what is the difference between sun and moon?88

All boundaries such as those between the sacred and secular, the lover and the beloved, obedience and disobedience are removed when the object of desire is to attain union with God.

In addition, the ubiquitous antinomian themes and motifs can be considered as expressions of diverse identities in Islamic society, which is often depicted as homogenous with regards to its religious, political, moral, and ethical rules. Antinomian themes allowed mystics to raise questions about the relationships between the centre and the periphery, the normal and the deviant, the profane and the divine. Their elaboration of antinomian concepts has led some modern readers to characterize a mystic such as Rūmī as an atypical Muslim presenting a gentle, loving version of Islam, as I mentioned at the outset of this article. But medieval Islamic society was not homogenous, and poets such as Rūmī used antinomian motifs deliberately to change the hierarchy of values defining the centre and periphery.89 The same dynamic has been happening in Western societies: the outward aspects of ‘the Church’ are criticized to advance an ideal of inner growth. The unorthodox and unruly character of the Qalandar can today easily be detected in role models such as the pop divas Madonna (an admirer of Rūmī’s poetry) and Beyoncé (who named her son Rumi).

Although classical Persian poets such as Sa‘dī, Ḥāfiẓ, and ‘Umar Khayyām have enjoyed much popularity in the West since the seventeenth century,90

88 The quatrain is also included in Gamard and Farhadi’s Quatrains of Rūmī, p. 408, on which I have largely based my translation of this quatrain.
90 Ḥāfiẓ was greatly appreciated by Goethe, who was inspired by Ḥāfiẓ’s poems in writing his Westöstliche Dīvān. While many translations of Rūmī were available in several European languages, he was not known outside the specialist circles of the Orientalists. Rūmī only became popular in the last two decades of the twentieth century, when translations by Coleman Barks unleashed a Rūmī mania in the US. The message of love in his work and the unorthodox way in which he combines love and religious emotions has contributed to his popularity. For the reception of Persian poets in the UK and the US see J. D. Yohannan, Persian Poetry in England and America: A 200-Year History (New York: Caravan Books 1977); for Rūmī’s reception see ch. 14 and 15 of Lewis, Rumi, Past and Present, pp. 564–634; idem, Franklin Lewis, ‘Rumi’s Masnavi, Part 1: World Figure or New Age Fad?’ in The Guardian, 30 November 2009 (available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/30/rumi-masnavi-muslim-poetry), accessed 27 July 2018; see also
Rūmī was quite unknown in Europe and North America until the late eighteenth century. However, it is only in recent decades that Rūmī has become internationally renowned in the West. In this era in which there seems to be an increasing gap between Muslims and the so-called Judeo-Christian-humanistic Westerners, we can only hope that the increasing appreciation of Rūmī's work and the tradition to which he belongs will bring people of diverse ethnicities and religions together. As Rūmī’s himself says:91

Have you come to lead people to union
Or have you come to tear them apart?

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