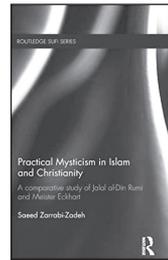


Practical Mysticism in Islam and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jalal al-Din Rumi and Meister Eckhart

By Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh

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Reviewed by Brian M. Welter



Introduction

The fact that Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) and Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) took largely contrasting stances on the religious life has surprisingly little to do with their differing religious backgrounds, Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh argues. They belong to distinct mystical schools, both of which could exist in either Islam or Christianity. Rumi's love-centered perspective contrasts with Eckhart's scholastic tendency for classification. Zarrabi-Zadeh is never altogether convinced that the medieval Dominican was ever himself a mystic, and claims that he may have analyzed mysticism out of theological interest. Conversely, Rumi's writings clearly outline his spiritual journeys.

Scholars interested in the mystical life will find the book satisfying, though it may also contribute to interreligious dialogue by showing that distinctive spiritual outlooks and practices do not always originate primarily from religious differences, but from one's perspective on the spiritual life itself.

Linguistically, Zarrabi-Zadeh seems at home in both Eckhart's medieval German-Latin writings and Rumi's Persian. This familiarity with primary languages from two civilizations makes him a rare scholar, someone like Henry Corbin who, before becoming a great writer on Iranian Islam, had translated Heidegger into French. Readers will appreciate this cross-civilizational literacy because the author is able to expand on the meanings of individual words and show how each author was a gifted writer. This is particularly so for Eckhart, who foreshadowed Heidegger's fruitful play with German words.

Given the refinement of both Rumi and Eckhart, the author avoids facile connections. He sticks to certain linguistic terms, which he uses to compare and contrast the two thinkers. Before the comparison of such terms as Eckhart's *abgescheiden* or *eigenschaft* with Rumi's terms, such as *fanā*, Zarrabi-Zadeh spends much time defining this lexis within the works of each writer. This allows him to offer richer juxtapositions, as he attends in detail to the inevitable inconsistencies and multiple meanings found in these terms and in the larger corpus of each writer.

Faithful to a Tradition

Adding to the discussion's richness, the author points out how both mystics borrowed much from previous thinkers. Rumi followed Sufis such as al-Ghazali, while Eckhart looked to Neoplatonists such as Proclus. Neither attempted to be an original thinker. They saw themselves as faithful to a tradition, with Eckhart sometimes seeming more faithful to Neoplatonism than to Christianity.

Yet Zarrabi-Zadeh could have brought up even more influences on Rumi, as we are given very little in the way of a Sufi lineage to which he may have belonged. As well, the author could have shown the two thinkers more deeply embedded in their own religious cultures. The discussion sometimes comes off as a laboratory dissection, with both men separated from their environment.

Orthodox or Heterodox?

Nevertheless, Zarrabi-Zadeh writes with clarity on the Dominican's trinitarian theology. He outlines Eckhart's unorthodox view whereby the unknowable *Ground* of God preceded the Persons of the Trinity.

Perhaps the Dominican's heterodoxy, which comes very close to a refutation of the Trinity, in fact, stems from a heavy reliance on Proclus. Eckhart taught that God's Ground shared its being with the ground of the human soul. Zarrabi-Zadeh does not delve too deeply into the theology behind this and the troubles Eckhart faced from religious authorities. He keeps to the effects of this on Eckhart's mystical theology, highlighting ancient philosophy's direct application to the spiritual life, and thus how the ancient Greeks influenced medieval Christian spirituality.

While Rumi followed in a long line of Sufis, he did not in general share the same outlook on the spiritual life as one well-known Sufi also living in Konya at the same time as he, his older contemporary Ibn Arabi:

There are also a small number of passages in Rumi's corpus that come close to Ibn 'Arabi's mysticism, particularly where Rumi employs the terminology of the Universal Intellect, which sometimes appear to be incompatible with Rumi's own mystical principles. Nevertheless, in spite of all possible influences Ibn 'Arabi's school might have had on Rumi, Rumi's works attest to the fact that he was not interested in Ibn 'Arabi's mysticism or the theory of emanation found within it, and that he attempted to remain within the framework of his own Sufisma (143).

These words highlight how Zarrabi-Zadeh avoids black-and-white perspectives, and develops general tendencies that also admit to nuance and diversity in Sufi thought and praxis.

This diversity sometimes bordered on the heterodox for Rumi, as the author notes. Less orthodox than many Sufis, Rumi only highlights the aspects of *sharī'ah* law that in his view apply to the inner spiritual life while ignoring the rest. In this sense, Zarrabi-Zadeh perhaps unwittingly shows how Rumi never achieved a unitive vision, as he left out “economic, political, and judicial issues which are generally aggregated together under the title of 'transactions'” (160). The author shows how this attitude went further: “Rumi regards Islamic rituals as 'accidents' ... which pass away”; “even practices shared by both Rumi's *sharī'ah* and conventional *sharī'ah* hold different meanings and functions within each respective system” (160). Unity is found in this “mystical *sharī'ah*”, whereby it fits in with “contemplative Sufi prayer and mystical dance” (161).

Diversity in Mysticism

Zarrabi-Zadeh gives readers a sense of the diversity within mysticism, and within Sufism, without deviating from his main thesis. He argues at the outset for the importance of recognizing this diversity as a means of avoiding “the Ibn Arabization” of Rumi's thought. His whole thesis is based on comparison as a way to avoid the homogenizing of mystical thought. This aims for a more refined reading, whereby we acknowledge similarities, even across religions and civilizations, as with Rumi and Eckhart, while also identifying differences.

Eckhart was the Christian mystic of the intellect, Rumi the Islamic mystic of love. Yet Zarrabi-Zadeh's attempt to understand more clearly the one through the perspective of the other unearths a rich and more complex picture. Their contrasting stances still allow for many parallels:

Rumi exhibits, in the cognitive aspect, a strong mistrust for all manner of rational activity undertaken by the partial intellect and the sciences connected to it. He considers a dichotomy between philosophy and the conventional branches of science, on the one hand, and the mystical way of attaining knowledge based on vision and intuition, on the other, and he praises the latter at the expense of the former (176).

This does not differ so much from Eckhart's intellectual *kenosis*: “Eckhart's cognitive detachment also includes man's becoming empty of all creaturely images and forms shaped in the soul in addition to his releasement from the mediate and restricted way of knowing through them, so that he can achieve true and immediate knowledge of God” (176). Labels such as “mystic of the intellect” or “mystic of love” denote tendencies rather than absolutes, as readers clearly see.

Diverging from Rumi, Eckhart did assign “natural reason” the ability “to uncover truths,” and he saw “no strict dichotomy between natural truth and revealed, intuitional truth” (176). Zarrabi-Zadeh calls Rumi “irrational,” perhaps a strong word which nowadays conjures up “crazy,” “overly-emotional,” and even “violent.” Yet the author applies this in its truest sense, explaining that the famous Sufi “never hesitates in showing strong hostility toward the partial intellect”; that he “correlates intelligence with the Devil”; that he “attacks those making use of, and relying on, the intellect and any knowledge gleaned from it” (177).

Psychology

Rumi follows many Sufi writers such as Ibn 'Arabi in developing a sophisticated psychology and anthropology. Zarrabi-Zadeh examines this within the context of Rumi's analysis of the *nafs*, thereby tying together the moral and the psychological with the spiritual. This thought is reminiscent of St. Augustine's teachings on concupiscence, where the *nafs* "results in man's moral attachment to bestial behaviors" (164). Rumi outlines the direct moral and psychological consequences for the spiritual life, Zarrabi-Zadeh notes: "The 'evil' that the carnal soul incites is, for Rumi, anything that prevents man from mystical progression and binds him to the lower realm of his animal nature and matter" (164). In keeping with traditionalist religious spiritual psychologies, Rumi does strive for a unitive vision notwithstanding the above-mentioned shortcomings.

Hierarchy

The two thinkers share a hierarchical view of man and the cosmos with God at the center. Who is God for Rumi? "Not a being without personal qualities, but rather ... a personality so wide that it involves in itself all existence and actions. All of Rumi's poetry and prose are filled with the presence of a heavenly Beloved who sees, hears, replies, communicates, and becomes glad and angry" (144-145). This is a personal God.

As with many mystics, neither thinker ever establishes a clear boundary between the inner and outer worlds, that is to say, between the psychological and anthropological on the one hand, and the cosmological on the other. The cosmos and the human soul are reflections of each other. This leads Zarrabi-Zadeh to make interesting remarks on Rumi's theory of evolution in contrast to Darwin's: "Rumi neither begins with naturalism nor ends with it.... He speaks of 'the spiritual life of inanimate beings' and a world in which mountains, seas, and the moon are all conscious and have 'hearing and sight and are happy'" (155). The author convincingly depicts Rumi's evolutionism as grandiose, optimistic, love-filled, and God-oriented. It therefore offers a deeply satisfying and meaningful perspective. Darwin provides none of this.

Perhaps this is the book's basic lesson: That Rumi has produced and continues to produce great and beautiful fruit whereas the modern nihilist West remains stuck in its solipsistic prison.