

Between Cynicism and Sincerity in the Study of Sufism and Politics

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In the early thirteenth century, in the Central Asian province of Balkh, Baha al-din Valad, the father of the poet we now call Rumi, is said to have delivered a sermon in which he confronted the ruling Khwarezmshah, 'Ala al-Din Mohammad bin Takesh.¹ As a throng of people listened to him preach, Baha al-din addressed the shah in the following manner: "Oh king of this transient realm, know and be aware—though you do not know and are not aware—that you are a sultan and I am a sultan. They call you Sultan of the Commanders and they call me Sultan of the Religious Scholars, and you are my disciple."² Baha al-din then warns the Khwarezmshah about the impending arrival of the Tatar armies and withdraws his family from Balkh to go to the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, Baghdad.

In the decades after Baha al-din Valad's death in 1232, his son, Jalal al-din Rumi, emerged as a respected teacher within the Seljuk seat of power in the city of Konya in Central Anatolia. Scores of *murids*, or pupils, would come to listen to Rumi explain the mysteries of the Sufi path through his prose teachings, narrative and ode poetry, and ritual performances. It was up to select *murids* and other confidants, including his son, Sultan Valad, to transcribe Rumi's teachings. These transcriptions have survived into posterity through their efforts. In one significant passage from his collected sermons, Rumi finds out from Sultan Valad that an important government figure, Moin al-Din Parvana,³ has come to speak to Rumi:

One day Moin al-din the Parvana came to visit Mowlana [Rumi]. I informed my father and I sat for a long time with the Parvana. The Parvana sat waiting and I engaged in offering apologies because Mowlana had many times said: "I have my own affairs and ecstatic states and immersions in God. The commanders and friends cannot see me any time. Let them attend to their own situations and the affairs of the people. We will go and visit them."⁴

In response to this admonition, Moin al-din reacted with humility, only to later have Rumi emerge to speak with him. Moin al-din told Rumi that he thought he had been made to wait to learn humility. Rumi responded that that was not the

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case, telling him one should not rush good-looking or pleasant people away from their door too quickly, since it spoils the enjoyment of their company.

Regardless of this sugar-tongued exchange, the hagiographers here and elsewhere explicate in these stories how Rumi and his father participated in the tradition of asserting spiritual authority over worldly power. Despite this rhetorical positioning, there was not a tidy dichotomy between mystical teachers and the political circumstances in which they lived. While a sheikh could assert authority over the spiritual realm, he still had to participate in the sociopolitical realities of his day, which could often require patronage and other favors from the ruling parties. The ruling parties, for their part, patronized religious institutions and their figureheads to help advance their own ideological and political commitments. For Rumi's mystical order and the Seljuk and Mongol elites, this mystical-political symbiosis advanced both parties' interests through turbulent times in thirteenth-century Konya.

Mystical orders, especially those situated in urban environments, call for a higher degree of political interaction than was demanded of lone mystic hermits or roving groups of antinomian Sufis, such as the Malamatiyyah. In Rumi's case, evidence of this political interaction is shown in letters to Seljuk elites in which he asks for personal favors, employment for his disciples, and other forms of patronage.⁵ The Seljuk elites were known for creating and sustaining many religious institutions, from Hanafi madrassas to a variety of Sufi *khanaqas* in Konya and elsewhere.⁶ So there clearly would have been competition among Sufi orders for favor among the political classes, and thus any completely antiworldly authority positioning that appears in many Sufi writings would have been impracticable.⁷ Perhaps, then, it would be better to describe Sufi sheikhs like Rumi as mediating social actors between and among communities concerned with the worldly and/or the spiritual. This relationship of religion and politics runs counter to how these figures are often portrayed: as intercessors between the human and divine, as saints, or as the "pole of the age"—the divinely appointed representative of the spiritual that provided the check against earthly authority. While the validity of their spiritual claims cannot be independently verified, their social position is clearly that of mediator, not of an apolitical actor.

Ultimately, however, the question of the relation of mysticism and politics is not one that merely needs to be put to historical subjects and materials. The ways we approach and answer these questions can have contemporary consequences as well. Sufis, in the popular imagination, have been portrayed as the "good Muslims,"⁸ owing perhaps to their (perceived) interests in universality, spirituality, and love. There is an additional perception that Sufism is an internalized, personal approach to religion *in contrast to* the externalized, violent forms that continue to scourge. So, reflexively, it is worth asking what political consequences emerge when scholars contextualize Sufism and untangle its role in political activities. Might it sacrifice a tradition with deeply held convictions at the altar of historical criticism, solely to recover the knowledge that all humans are, at some level, political actors? Alternatively, might this pursuit expose the reductionism and essentialism of contemporary perceptions of mystically inclined Muslims, past and present? In undertaking

the pursuit of mysticism and politics historically, scholars must ask what impact and import such scholarship might have within the contemporary world.

We have seen, to some extent, what consequences emerge when the mystical becomes insulated and isolated from external, political life. Perennialist and traditionalist modes of thought, for example, have extracted elements of religious teachings to suit their own ends. Beginning with the simple premise that some universal truth undergirds all religious expression, twentieth-century perennialist authors like Aldous Huxley and Huston Smith looked to religious traditions outside Christianity, including Hinduism and Sufi Islam, for inspiration. Inevitably, parts of the source texts that do not comfortably fit within perennialist thought, or within universalizing spirituality in general, often disappear in their modern rearticulations. For example, many translations of Rumi's poetry excise explicit Qur'anic citations and other Islamic themes (not to mention the strict metrics and other formal aspects of the original).⁹ This, in turn, has led to spiritually inclined movements, which use Sufi texts and teachings yet dispense entirely with the (Islamic) context of their production. That dynamic can create an odd conundrum for the current scholar of Rumi, who often encounters people asking for sources of Rumi's quotations that do not exist.

Admittedly, greater attention by scholars and publics alike to the sociopolitical circumstances of Rumi's day seems a necessary corrective at this stage. The problems of criticism of the relationship between mysticism and politics appear, however, to be at least twofold: they could reduce the original phenomena of popularly driven Sufi movements like that of the Mevlevi to *merely* political negotiation between social actors looking out for their own best interests, or they could run afoul of contemporary spiritual movements and practices disinterested in, or hostile to, such external concerns within their own practice. So the question remains: is there an approach to mysticism and politics that can effectively straddle the line between a cynical, almost Machiavellian critique of religious orders and their teachings, and one that takes sincerity seriously yet is not apologetic and ahistorical?

Attentiveness to sincerity or passion does not deflect from a situated reading of historical subjects. But it is admittedly difficult to reconstitute in any accurate way, even if it seems obvious that the passion was deeply felt, especially in the Mevlevi case. To get at what drove and sustained this passion, I look to the performative, material, and aesthetic elements of Rumi's texts in relation to the early community of Mevlevi practitioners. This approach can entail recovering elements of the sensorium of the world they inhabited, from the clothing they wore to the bread that they ate to the instruments they played while they danced. While volumes of commentaries have been written—in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, English, and other languages—about Rumi's ideology and the meaning of his teachings, his community's relationship to those holding political power, first the Seljuks and Mongols and later the Ottomans, demands further study. Yet to do so without also “essaying the dance,” that is, without being attentive to the lived and embodied elements of Sufi experience, would constitute a missed opportunity. Further, to undertake such a pursuit without or despite our own awareness of the contemporary world in which such scholarship is produced would make us the worst kind of ostriches.

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Notes

- 1 Cf. Lewis, *Rumi*, 59–63. Lewis disagrees with Rumi's hagiographers that his father must have had some foreknowledge of the coming Mongol invasion "prophesized" in the passage to follow.
- 2 Aflaki, *Feats*, 13.
- 3 Moin al-din was a Seljuk vizier who later worked as a vassal in Konya for the Mongol rulers. See Hillenbrand, "Mu'īn Al-Dīn Sulaymān Parwāna."
- 4 Aflaki, *Feats*, 207.
- 5 Cf. Peacock, "Sufis and the Seljuk Court."
- 6 Cf. Wolper, *Cities and Saints*.
- 7 This competition has been described in Ay, "Sufi Shaykhs and Society." Traditionally, Sufis and Sufi orders have faced further forms of competition and criticism from legalistic and/or "fundamentalist" Muslims. Though this competition often plays out in scholarly screeds such as those of Ibn Taymiyyah, it has also played out violently, beginning with the execution of al-Hallaj in the ninth century and continuing today with the destruction of Sufi shrines and other ritual spaces in Pakistan and elsewhere.
- 8 Cf. Safi, "Good Sufi, Bad Muslims," wherein Safi discusses the problematic framing of Sufis in light of the Park 51 controversy in New York City. The contemporary misunderstanding in American media over what Sufism is, and who Sufis are or are not, was revived again after the death of 305 Muslims at the hands of Islamist militants at a Sufi-built mosque in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt in November 2017.
- 9 As recently described by Ali, "Erasure of Islam."

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