

Common Misconceptions About Rumi

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(Abbreviations: L=Franklin Lewis' *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*); Af=Aflâki's *Manâqib al-Ârifîn*; Sep=Sepahsâlâr's *Risâla*; Bah=Bahâ al-Din Valad's *Ma'ârif*; Ibt=Sultân Valad's *Ibtidâ-Nâma*; Maq=Shams-i Tabriz's *Maqâlât-i Shams-i Tabriz* (mostly translated by Chittick in *Me and Rumi*); JNO=Jâmi's *Nafahat al-Ons*; FB=Forûzânfar's *Risâla*; Mei=Meir's *Bahâ'-i Walad*; R=*Robâ'iyât-i Mawlânâ* (ed. Forûzânfar, vol. 8, trans. Gamard and Farhadi, *The Quatrains of Rumi*, 2008, 2023); M=Rumi's *Masnavi*; Q=Qur'an.

This article quotes plentifully from the research done by the late Franklin Lewis in his comprehensive book, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (2000, 2008). Dr. Lewis commented, sometimes incisively, on most of the common misconceptions about the now popular thirteenth century mystical poet and Sufi master, Jalâl al-Din Rumi. However, due to the large size of the book, as well as its academic approach, his authoritative clarifications of these issues are not widely known. The present author summarizes his own research on the topics [in brackets] and quotes or summarizes what Dr. Lewis had to say.

1. Rumi was born in Balkh (in present Afghanistan) in 1207.

“Bahâ al-Din [Rumi's father] may have been born in Balkh, but at least between June 1204 to 1210, during which time Rumi was born, Bahâ al-Din resided in a house in Vakhsh (Bah 2:143).” [L 47]

“All the hagiographers, including Sultan Valad, associated Bahâ al-Din and Rumi with Balkh, either because it was the family's ancestral home, or simply because it was the largest and most famous city in the region, whereas their actual home, Vakhsh, would be relatively unheard of to the people living in Anatolia.” [L 56] [Vakhsh is located in present-day Tajikistan]

2. Rumi was descended from a Turkish princess.

“Ahmad Aflâki (Af 7-9) makes the claim that Bahâ al-Din's mother was the daughter of 'All al-Din Mohammad Khwârazmshâh (r. 1200-1230), described as 'the paternal uncle' of Jalâl al-Din Khwârazmshâh. Jâmi repeats this (JNO 458) but the chronology is impossible (FB 7), and in any case, the portrait of her that emerges from Bahâ al-Din's comments does not square with a royal lineage (Mei 45). Furthermore, the association of religious figures with royalty in the Iranian hagiographical tradition (e.g., the intermarriage of the last Sasanian princess with the 'Alid family) is typological and must therefore be viewed with extreme skepticism.” [L 91]

3. Balkh was ruled by a series of invading Turks; therefore, Rumi's native language was probably Turkish.

[It is well-known that the Seljuk Turks adopted Persian language and culture throughout their empire, which stretched from Central Asia to Anatolia. In Lewis' section on Bahâ al-Din's parentage, he mentions that his grandfather, "Ahmad al-Khatibi, was born to Ferdows Chitin, the daughter of the reputed Hanafite jurist, . . ." ["Ferdows" is a Persian name. Lewis does not mention any Turkish names of Rumi's forbears.] [L 44]

4. Shams prayed to God to meet a saint of God and he offered his head as the price.

[Lewis does not mention this story, which occurs in a book by Dowlat-Shâh, a fifteenth century author,] "not known for his historical accuracy." [L 65]

5. Rumi may have learned about Buddhism in Balkh, which historically had been a Buddhist city, and there may have been Buddhists still living there.

"Balkh also harbored a centuries-old Jewish quarter which persisted into the Islamic period alongside the dominant Muslims." [L 44] [Lewis did not mention any other religious communities living there. Besides, Rumi was a young boy then and there would have been language barriers.]

6. Rumi's father became a famous Muslim cleric after three hundred clerics and scholars in the Balkh area miraculously had the same dream on the same night about him in which the Prophet Mohammad appeared to them and told them to call Bahâ al-Din the "King of Clerics."

"Bahâ al-Din tells us that just one person, albeit a very spiritual person, one of God's elect... had a dream. This person did not explicitly specify that the Prophet told him to call Bahâ al-Din 'Sultan al-Ulama,' but he did say that an illumined elder... addressed Bahâ al-Din as follows: 'O Sultan al-Ulama, come out so that the world may be filled with light...'" [Bahâ al-Din told a nobleman about the dream and the latter reported having a dream in which the Prophet designated Bahâ al-Din as the "Sultan of Clerics."] [L 54]

"... most scholars have assumed that Bahâ al-Din was among the most renowned Hanafî jurists of his day. This is not, however, the picture which emerges from Bahâ al-Din's own writings or from the historical dictionaries written in the medieval period about the famous scholars of Islam. As yet, no sources dating from the lifetime of Bahâ al-Din have been found which make mention of him and we must therefore assume that he was not widely known." [L 46]

7. Rumi's father was a disciple of the Central Asian Sufi master, Najm al-Din Kobra.

"However, a close examination of the writings of Bahâ al-Din and Borhân al-Din eventually led

Foruzânfar to rule out the possibility of any direct relationship between them and the founders and followers of the Kobravi order.... As a result, Persian and Turkish scholars no longer generally credit the claim of Kobravi influence.... The reasons for rejecting the notion of direct Kobravi influence on Bahâ al-Din are manifold and compelling. First of all, there is no mention of Najm al-Din Kobrâ, Majd al-Din Baghdâdi, or Majd al-Din Râzi, the principal promoters of the Kobravi order, in the extensive writings of Bahâ al-Din, Borhân al-Din or Jalâl al-Din Rumi.” [L 31]

“All this clearly shows that the early Mevlevi did not recognize any influence from the founders of the Kobravi order or place any special importance in their teachings.” [L 33]

8. Rumi’s family fled Balkh soon after the Mongol invasion had begun (in 1219) and before Balkh was conquered (in 1221)

“...it seems extremely unlikely that Bahâ could have been fleeing the coming onslaught.... all the speculation about the Mongol invasion provoking their departure seems rather farfetched.” [L 63]

“Furthermore, if Bahâ al-Din did flee an imminent Mongol attack, why would he leave his daughter and other parts of his family behind.... Up until two or three years before the invasions the relations between the Khwârazmshâh and the Mongols in Peking remained cordial enough; ‘Alâ al-Din received ambassadors in 1218 from Genghis Khan and a policy favoring trade was in force.... We have, in any case, seen how the political circumstances in the region were unstable before the Mongol forces arrived, and how Bahâ himself was longing to find a position in a more cosmopolitan urban center. It seems likely that he left Khorasan well before the Mongols descended to attack the area.” [L 64]

9. Rumi met the famous Persian mystical poet, ‘Attâr when his family travelled through Nishapur.

“The circumstances of time and place therefore make a meeting between Rumi and ‘Attâr theoretically possible, but Rumi himself never hints that such a meeting took place. Considering Rumi’s obvious affinity with ‘Attâr’s poetry, we would expect to find some allusion to this exciting and important event in young Rumi’s life, connecting him with the great Sufis of the past.... Sultan Valad, however, makes no mention of any such encounter with ‘Attâr in his account of the family’s journey westward.” [L 65]

10. Rumi was a Muslim cleric and scholar until he met Shams al-Tabriz, who transformed him into a mystic, or Sufi.

[Rumi was already an advanced mystic when Shams came to Konya, having undergone extensive Sufi training under Borhân al-Din Termezi, the leading disciple and successor of

Rumi's father. The latter had already] "designated Borhân as the spiritual guide or godfather of Rumi... When word of Bahâ al-Din's death reached Borhân... (he) made his way to Konya." [L 106]

"Rumi had inherited only one part of his father's legacy—the shell, or worldly knowledge—whereas Borhân had inherited the path—his spiritual powers. Borhân explained that Bahâ al-Din, in addition to acquired knowledge, had also experienced mystical states and possessed gnostic knowledge... These mystical states were not anything that could be learned; they had to be deserved. Borhân explained that he himself had achieved such states under Bahâ al-Din's guidance. Rumi, too, could attain them. Rumi became a devoted disciple to Borhân al-Din and for nine years remained in his company until Borhân died, whereupon Rumi undertook another five years of fasting and self-mortification. After all this, Rumi achieved Shaykh-hood..." [L 106]

12. Shams cured Rumi of his attachment to book-reading by throwing some books into a pool of water, or into fire, and miraculously bringing them out undamaged.

[Lewis mentions these stories as not included by Aflâki, but written later by fifteenth century authors such as Jâmi and also Dowlat-Shâh], "not known for his historical accuracy." [L 65]

13. When Shams met Rumi, he asked him who was more spiritually advanced: the Prophet Muhammad or the Sufi Bâyezid al-Bistâmi; when he indicated the latter, Rumi fainted.

"...Shams reserves for Bâyezid one of the most caustic things he has to say about anyone (Maq 741): 'As the Chosen One [Mohammad], God's blessings upon him, says: "Glory to Thee. We have not worshipped Thee as it befits Thee." And he [Bâyezid] says: "Glory to me, how great is my station." If someone supposed his station to be greater than the station of the Chosen One, he is a real idiot and ignoramus.'" [L 158]

"Sepahsâlâr says (Sep 127)... 'Bâyezid says "Glory to me, how great is my station" and "Within my cloak there is naught but God," whereas the Prophet, despite the grandeur of his station, said: "Seventy times every day I ask forgiveness at the threshold of the Lord."'"

"Aflâki (Af 84)... comes up with a more embellished version... He [Shams] replied, 'Then how do you explain that with all his grandeur, he would say "We have not known the truth of Thee," whereas Abâyezid says, "Glory to me, how great is my station and I am the king of kings."'" [In this first of two versions, Aflaki depicts Rumi as fainting after hearing these words.]

"Aflâki (Af 619) has Rumi reply that Bâyezid's thirst was quenched with one mouthful, and he saw such light as his small window would let in, whereas the Prophet never stopped thirsting for God and continued progressing, going further and further and seeing more of God's light day by day, hour by hour. After hearing this reply, Shams shouted out and fell down. His holiness

Mowlâna directed that he should be picked up and carried to the school of Mowlâna.” [L 159]

14. Many of Rumi’s verses obviously show that he felt homoerotic love toward his spiritual master, Shams. Therefore, they may have had a sexual relationship after they met during a weeks-long spiritual retreat alone together.

[Homoerotic verses were common in Persian poetry centuries before Rumi’s time. Often, the sex of the beloved is ambiguous (also due to the fact that the word “ū” can mean “he” “she” or “it”).] This ambiguity allows for a wide range of types of praise for the beloved, who could also be God or human. Therefore, it would be a misunderstanding of classical Persian Sufi poetry to interpret verses of love for a male beloved as evidence of a poet’s actual homoerotic feelings.]

[In addition, Rumi followed the Sufi path of annihilation of self (*fanâ*’), which begins with annihilation of the self in the presence of the Sufi master (the human beloved) and ends in the annihilation of self in the presence of God (the divine Beloved). The first stage necessarily requires the lover-disciple to cultivate spiritual love for his (male) master until he sees the master’s spiritual beauty reflected in everything. Finally, he transcends his need for the master and attains “union” with, or nearness to God, and sees God reflected in all things. This is mystical, not homoerotic, love.]

“Homoeroticism pervades medieval poetry. The beloved in most ghazal poetry is androgynous, and often equated with the ruler, decked in armor and slaying those who approach him. We would be quite wrong to suppose that when a male poet describes a ruler in a panegyric as a beautiful young warrior, for whom the poet longs as a lover longs for the beloved, this involves physical love between the two. Sexuality, or at least the trope of male penetration, stands for a power relation in Persian poetry. The penetrator is the active partner (*fâ’el*) in a sexual liaison and holds the dominant position. The penetrated one (*maf’ûl*) is objective beauty or desire, and is equated with femininity and weakness, or with the weakness of pre-adolescent boys lacking facial hair. By penetration of the woman or boy, the active partner establishes his dominance in a sexual relationship. The woman or boy may arouse desire, but she or he occupies an inferior social status. Indeed, the collections of medieval Persian poetry are rife with boasting and insults which revolve around the issue of sexual penetration. A poet will boast of having humiliated his enemy by sodomizing him and/or penetrating his womenfolk. A stigma attached to being penetrated, and a self-respecting mature male would not allow this to happen to himself. Sodomy, though condemned by Islamic law, doubtless did take place among certain Sufi orders and the occasional legal case demonstrates that it was a real phenomenon.” [L 321]

“Clearly, the cult of the ephebe lived on in medieval Iran and men fancied androgynous pre-pubescent boys, at least until they sprouted facial hair. Under normal circumstances, Muslim women were largely segregated from non-related men, and appeared in public only under a veil, so adolescent boys often became platonic and also libidinous objects of desire. This homoerotic environment, however, should not be equated with homosexual orientation. For one thing,

amorous attention was from the dominant party, the phallocrat, toward the penetrated party, male or female. When a boy passed a certain age and grew facial hair, he himself became a member of the sexually dominant class and would no longer submit to penetration. Violation of these social norms led to scandal and legal prosecution. Furthermore, the men attracted to androgynous boys (marked as effeminate by their hairlessness) also desired women, married and had children. In any case, Rumi condemns such sexual exploitation, both on humanitarian grounds and because it contravenes the law of Islam. Sexual pleasure may be pursued and enjoyed, but only within the confines of marriage.” [L 323]

“The suggestion that the relationship between Shams and Rumi was a physical and homosexual one entirely misunderstands the context. Rumi, as a forty-year-old man engaged in ascetic practices and teaching Islamic law, to say nothing of his obsession with following the example of the Prophet, would not have submitted to the penetration of the sixty-year-old Shams, who was, in any case, like Rumi, committed to following the Prophet and opposed to the worship of God through human beauty. Rumi did employ the symbolism of the homoerotic, or more properly, androgynous love, in his poems addressed to Shams as the divine beloved, but this merely adopts an already 300-year-old convention of the poetry of praise in Persian literature.” [L 323]

15. Shams was a wild, wandering dervish who was illiterate and free of religious bonds, who followed the Sufi path of blame.

“Shams was a Shâfe‘i (Maq 182) and he studied *fiqh* [Islamic law], reading extensively in the standard legal textbooks.... Shams was thus very educated, contrary to what the accounts of a common man turned mystic suggest. However, he cloaked his nature from religious scholars as well as from practicing pietists, such that his contemporaries were confused about whether he considered himself a scholar of law (*faqih*) or a fakir (*faqir*), a Sufi practicing spiritual poverty (Maq 326).” [L 142]

[A perusal of the book of Shams’ teachings (Maq) that were recorded by his disciples shows that he was a pious Muslim who was highly educated and dedicated to “following” the Prophet Muhammad, as well as an advanced Sufi who was intimately familiar with the mystical level of interpreting the sayings of the Prophet and the verses of the Qur’an. For many years, he searched for a fellow mystic who was similarly dedicated and who had the capacity to understand his divine secrets. The book depicts him as tending to be blunt and sometimes caustic, but not as a blame-seeking type of Sufi (as Aflâki portrayed him many decades later).]

17. Shams was murdered by Rumi’s jealous disciples. Shams’ body was secretly buried in Rumi’s religious college, presently a mosque with a sarcophagus above his grave.

“But there is simply no physical evidence of Shams’ murder. No explicit statement from Rumi, from Sultan Valad or Sepahsâlâr—the three sources closest to the situation—corroborates the murder theory. It seems unlikely that the conspirators could plot to kill a famous person and have

it kept secret from Rumi for so long.” [L 190]

[Lewis criticized Aflâki for contradictory accounts: Aflâki claimed that Shams’ body simply vanished in front of his murderers or that they threw it down a well. And he claimed that Sultan Valad had a dream in which Shams appeared to him and told him that he had been killed and that his body was in a well. However, Sultan Valad never mentioned such a dream in his extensive writings or that he helped to wash and bury Shams’ body next to the grave of the builder of Rumi’s college: Amir Badr al-Din Gowhartâsh in his father’s college. However, only one grave exists at the site, not two, and Gowhartâsh reportedly died over a dozen years after Shams’ final disappearance. “Shams could not then have been buried next to Gowhartâsh and the whole fabric of this story begins to unravel.” [L 189]

18. Rumi invented dervish whirling, called “Sema,” and was the first whirling dervish.

[The Sufis had a practice called *samâ‘* that involved spontaneous spiritual movements inspired by mystical poetry and music that led to strong emotions that approached rapture or ecstasy. The dervishes would not move unless they felt attracted by the divine Will; thus there were no planned movements. Movements included hand clapping, foot stamping, hand waving, whirling, and shouting, among others. The word, *samâ‘* means “listening”—as if hearing the Voice of God, which could lead to spiritual ecstasy. Sufis had been practicing *samâ‘* for several centuries before Rumi’s time, especially in Persian-speaking countries, which included the Seljuk Empire in Anatolia. During the centuries following Rumi’s death, the Persian language and culture of the Seljuks faded and was replaced by Ottoman Turkish language and culture and the *samâ‘* was changed into a Turkish Sufi ritual of bowing and whirling called Sema (which for Turks, always means “whirling”). The *samâ‘* in Rumi’s day was quite different than the choreographed ritual of recent centuries. It does, however, include Persian verses from Rumi’s works that have been set to music.]

“Amir ‘Âlem [Chelebi] II... travelled quite a bit before passing away in 1421 (GM 134). At this point, a son of Amir ‘Âlem II took over the leadership of the Mevlevi community. It was supposedly during the stewardship of Pir ‘Adel Chelebi II that the Mevlevi ceremonies began to assume a ritual form...” {L 444]

[The Mevlevi order was originally a Persian Sufi tradition in which Persian language and culture predominated (all of the earliest books by Rumi, his father, his teachers, his son, and grandson were written in Persian). But when the Seljuk Empire faded in Anatolia, the Mevlevi order gradually became Turkish and the number of Mevelvis who spoke and read Persian dwindled. Similarly, the old spontaneous *samâ‘* was changed to a set ritual based on bowing and whirling.]

19. When Rumi did “Sema,” that means he was whirling.

[The Arabic word, *samâ‘* (“listening”) that was used for centuries to mean spontaneous ecstatic

movements of dervishes inspired by mystical poetry and music, came to mean in Turkish, “whirling” (either individually or in a group). As a result, the numerous times that Aflâki (who wrote about seventy years after Rumi died) mentioned that Rumi participated in *samâ‘* have been interpreted to mean that he was whirling, sometimes for hours.]

[When Aflâki wrote his hagiography (about seventy years after Rumi died), Rumi was already well-known as a religious scholar who had become passionately engaged in ecstatic states in the *samâ‘* (but not yet for whirling). As he said in his famous story, “... one day Hazrat-i Mawlânâ passed by the environs of the goldbeaters of the city, while being overcome with (spiritual) passion and engagement in *samâ‘*, for which he was famous in the world. When he heard the pleasant rhythmic sound of hammers, a wondrous passion manifested in him and he began whirling [*charkh*].” This was near the shop of Sheikh Salâh al-Din, who ordered his apprentices to continue hammering until Rumi finished the *samâ‘*, which lasted from the time of the noon prayer until the time of the afternoon prayer, even though the gold leaf would be destroyed. However, miraculously, no damage occurred, the shop became filled with gold leaf, and all the instruments of gold-beating, such as hammers, turned to gold. (Af 5:7)]

[However, Aflâki took many of his stories from Sepahsâlâr’s earlier hagiography (written about thirty years after Rumi’s death) and often added exaggerations and miracles. In the original story, there is no mention of whirling: Attracted by the sound made by Salâh al-Din’s hammer, Rumi entered his shop and engaged in *samâ‘* movements; whirling [*charkhîdan*] is not mentioned. Salâh al-Din did not stop hammering (even though he knew that it would ruin the gold plate) until Rumi stopped. (Sep 265). Aflâki mentioned whirling rarely. Therefore, Aflâki’s depiction of Rumi as a great whirler is a fiction, and the belief that the Sema ritual honors and imitates Rumi as a great whirler is without a foundation. We do not know how Rumi whirled but, based on the stories, he may have whirled for a time and then continued with other ecstatic movements.]

[In a famous story in the Masnavi Rumi described *samâ‘* as including clapping of hands, stamping of feet, dancing, and singing—but not whirling. (M 2:532)]

“*Samâ‘* ideally involves the use of poems and music to focus the listener’s concentration on God and perhaps even induce a trance-like state of contemplative ecstasy (*vajd*, *hâl*). When this happens it often moves the listener to shake his arms or dance. It is therefore a kind of mobile meditation or deliberative dancing, a mode of worship and contemplation. According to..., the *samâ‘* of Shaykh Abu Sa‘id would include waving the hands as well as circling about and stamping the feet.” “Hojviri... (explained) that the movements of the dervishes are not dancing but are responding to mystical ecstasy.” [L 309]

20. Rumi wrote so often about wine, wine taverns, and drunkenness that he must have meant alcoholic, as well as symbolic, wine.

[Sufi poetry (whether Arabic, Persian, or Turkish) is replete with wine symbolism in which the

wine-server may represent God or the Beloved, the wine-tavern the Sufi lodge, the drunkard the mystic lover, the wine the spiritual grace, and drunkenness the ecstatic states of mystical consciousness. To interpret otherwise is to miss the irony of a type of poetry that appears to praise wine and drunkenness in predominantly Islamic cultures in which wine-drinking is forbidden to Muslims by religious law. It is also to miss teachings about spiritual states of consciousness that are beyond the ordinary (or “sober”) mind.]

“Some Sufis, particularly the Malamâtis, did, indeed, drink wine. Even those who did not, however, used wine as a symbol of divine or mystical intoxication. As opposed to those ulama and ascetics who worshipped God out of fear, calculating their sins and good deeds, keeping account of the laws and exhortations which they observed as against those which they contravened or neglected, wine represented the dizzying effect of loving God with abandon, not out of fear of hell or hope of heaven, but because the worshipper wished to merge with the divine. It represents the *mysterium tremendum*, the sense of God’s presence in the mind and heart of the worshipper, as opposed to the knowledge of God’s law which the conventional ulama made the object of their religious studies. Likewise, the poetry of the Sufis rejects rationality (*‘aql*) for love (*‘eshq*), the mode of fervent devotion. In the language of poetry, the excessive devotion of the true lover of God might lead to charges of heresy (*kufir*), but this true love is to be preferred to conventional faith (*imân*). These are, however, poetic tropes. Though poetic trope and personal practice overlap in the case of some poets (Hâfez, for example), it is extremely difficult to conceive of Rumi drinking. Although he may have demonstrated greater compassion or tolerance for those who drank than many of the ulama... Rumi’s poetry certainly intends this symbolic meaning of wine, which Persian poets like Sanâ’i and ‘Attâr, and Arab poets like Ibn al-Fârid, had firmly established.” [L 325]

24. Rumi is famous for his teachings about mystical love in verses, especially those that were translated by Coleman Barks, such as: “Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

Coleman Barks is an American poet and a former university professor of literature. His books, which reinterpret Rumi’s spiritual teachings, have been the main cause of the surprising popularity of Rumi in the US and elsewhere. He is not a Rumi translator, since he does not read Persian. Instead, he uses the literal translations made by scholars and reinterprets these poetically and calls his versions “translations.” He shows little interest in what Rumi actually said (as can best be conveyed via translations from another language), but tries to express what he feels that Americans want Rumi to say, or not to say. As a result, he minimizes Islamic terms and beliefs and depicts Rumi as being more spiritual than religious. The following is an accurate translation of the verse quoted above: “There are a hundred kinds of prayer [*namâz*], bowing [*rukû’*], and prostration [*sujûd*] for the one whose prayer-niche [*mihirâb*] is the beauty of the Beloved [*jamâl-i dûst*].” [R 81]

“On the other hand, Bly and Barks tend to present Rumi as a guru rather calmly dispensing

words capable of resolving, panacea-like, all our ontological ailments.... This view of Rumi as a sage leads Barks and Bly to teleport the poems out of their cultural and Islamic context into the inspirational discourse of non-parochial spirituality, all of which makes for a Rumi who shares the social assumptions of a modern American audience.”(L 592]

25. Rumi was born and raised a Muslim and became his father’s successor as a cleric and scholar, but through the influence of Shams he went beyond the religion of Islam and followed the “Religion of Love,” which he said is higher than all religions: “The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the (only) religion and creed is—God.” (M 2:1770)

“It will simply not do to extract quotations out of context and present Rumi as a prophet of the presumptions of a syncretic spirituality. While Rumi does indeed demonstrate a tolerant and inclusive understanding of religion, he also, we must remember, trained as a preacher, like his father before him, and as a scholar of Islamic law. Rumi did not come to his theology of tolerance and inclusive spirituality by turning away from traditional Islam or organized religion, but through an immersion in it; his spiritual yearning stemmed from a radical desire to follow the example of the Prophet Mohammad and actualize his potential as a perfect Muslim.” [L 10]

23. Rumi taught that all religions are one. Some of Rumi’s most famous quotes refer to his alleged acceptance of other religions, such as his most famous poem: “Come, come again, whoever you may be, come again; even though you may be an unbeliever or a Magian or a fire worshipper, come again. Our gate is not a gate of despair. Even if you have broken your vows of repentance a hundred times, come again.” And his well-known verse: “What is to be done, O Moslems? For I do not recognize myself. I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Zoroastrian, nor Moslem.” And also: “I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see one altar.”

[These verses do not occur in Rumi’s works and, therefore, were not composed by Rumi. These and similar verses have been used for centuries to support Rumi’s reputation in the West as a mystic who taught radical acceptance of all religions and cared little about differences between them.]

[There are few verses in Rumi’s works that refer to unity of religions, but these are expressed from an ecstatic mystical experience of divine unity in which all differences and separations are transcended. For example: “For beyond (the realm of contraries) all religion is one: hundreds of thousands of years are the same as a single hour” (M 1:3504). And: “Every prophet and every saint has a way, but it leads to God: all (the ways) are one.” (M 1:3086)]

“This ecumenical attitude does not mean, however, that one may dispense with the outward observances of religion. The saints do not fail to pray, to fast, to perform alms, to go on pilgrimage and so forth.... Contrary to his contemporary portrayal in the West as an apostle of non-denominational spirituality in which individuals can pursue the development of their souls

outside the established religious traditions, particularly Islam, Rumi insists on the primacy of the Koran and the prophets as spiritual guides to mankind.” [L 407]

22. Since the leaders of all religious communities attended Rumi’s funeral, this shows that Rumi had disciples from all religions.

[This story is mentioned only once in the earliest Rumi-related literature. It states that at Rumi’s funeral, “all the religious communities... were present, including the Christians and the Jews, the Greeks, the Arabs and the Turks, and others as well... (and) walked in procession, holding up their books.... (They said), ‘If you Muslims call Mawlana the Muhammad of your time, we recognize him as the Moses of the era and the Jesus of the age.’” [Aflaki, I, 3:580] This story indicates that Rumi was venerated by all the people of Konya. It does not state that Rumi had disciples from all religions or that representatives of all world religions were present. Rather, it means that leaders from all the religious communities that were present in Konya at the time—basically, Jews and Christians of various denominations (such as Byzantine, Armenian, Syrian, and Georgian). Rumi appears to have had little contact with people of other religions. In Aflâki’s book, stories about his encounters with Christians have the stock ending of mass conversion to Islam. It appears that Rumi knew little more about other religions than what he learned in Islamic schools. Furthermore, there was a language barrier, since he spoke little Greek. Aflâki told of only one case of someone from another religion who became Rumi’s disciple. His name was Theyânûs and he had been a Greek Orthodox Christian until he met Rumi, who converted him to Islam and named him, ‘Ala’ al-Din. (Af 3:190, 3:319)]

26. Rumi’s son, Sultan Valad, founded the Mevlevi Order.

[Before Rumi died (in 1273), he appointed his closest disciple, Chelebi Husâm al-Din as his successor. Husâm had spent years with Rumi, writing down the verses of the *Masnavi* as he composed them. He was the leader of the Mevlevi Order for the first twelve years. During this period, he maintained Rumi’s custom of holding a *Masnavi* lesson followed by *samâ’* after the weekly Friday prayer, he appointed disciples as sheikhs whom he sent to a number of cities, and he over-saw the building of the mausoleum shrine which contained the graves of Rumi and his father. After that, another of Rumi’s leading disciples, Karim al-Din Baktamor took the lead until his death in 1292, when Sultân Valad became the overall leader. During the earlier years, Sultân Valad worked to insure that copies of his father’s *Masnavi* were accurately made. During the years of his leadership, he wrote three *masnavis*, a *divân*, and one prose book, with the intention of making his father’s teachings more easily understood. He also established Chalabism, according to which the head of the Order would always be a direct male descendent (Chalabi) of Rumi’s.]

27. When dervishes whirl, they are following in the path of Rumi, who was famous for his ecstatic whirling. Their right arms and hands are held upwards in order to receive heavenly grace and their left arms and hands are held downwards in order to pass it on to this lower world. They

represent planets orbiting around the sun.

[Rumi became famous for whirling, but this is based on a fictional story as discussed above. It is important to distinguish the symbolism of ritual actions from actual spiritual experiences during such. Thus, it can be said that the arm positions of whirlers have a symbolic meaning, but not that a man who is spinning on a stage in front of an audience is delivering actual spiritual grace and uniting heaven and earth. That would be a grandiose interpretation. The whirler may only be a dancer, not an authentic dervish or a Mevlevi who may be having an actual spiritual experience in the present moment.]

[The Whirling Prayer Ceremony (Sema) has been interpreted as symbolizing the spiritual ascent of the soul in accordance with the Sufi teaching about four levels that are represented by the four “Selams,” or rotations in the Ceremony. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the whirlers in the Ceremony are actually attaining a particular mystical state that corresponds to a particular level while they are performing before an audience.]

[Whirling in Sufism was inspired by a mystical interpretation of a verse in the Qur’an: “Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of God” (Q2.115). The rotation is counter-clockwise, like the circling of pilgrims around the Ka’ba in Mecca. Symbolically, the whirler is turning inwardly towards his heart as a way of seeing the Face of God, as well as circling around the “Ka’ba of the Heart,” all the while chanting silently, “Allah” with each step. In the Mevlevi Ceremony (Sema), the whirlers make seven rotations, which symbolize the seven counter-clockwise ritual rotations around the Ka’ba. The tall hats of the dervishes symbolize their tombstones, the black robes their graves, and the white gowns their grave clothes. The banging of the drum symbolizes the sound of the Trumpet that inaugurates the Day of Resurrection, when the dervishes slap the floor and stand up and, led by the Sheikh, walk slowly in three rotations that include ritual bowing. Then they remove their black robes and, with permission from the Sheikh, begin to spin joyously during four rotations that symbolize the ecstatic mystical resurrection of the elect ones of God. The Sheikh sits and stands on a red-colored sheepskin; he represents Mevlana Rumi and the red color symbolizes the color of sunset, when Hz. Rumi died. During the final circling, the Sheikh whirls very slowly in his robe in the center of the circle of dervishes. He represents the spiritual Polestar or Axis or “Ka’ba of the Heart” of the Universe.]

[The Ceremony does not represent the sun circled by spinning planets (a Western, non-Islamic interpretation). The whole ceremony is symbolic of mystical death and resurrection.]