

## Rumi & New Age

Rumi is, to say the least, very popular in the west. A lot of that popularity is due to various types of New Age that seem to agree or relate to Rumi and his poetry of love. Because of this Rumi is a perfect example of a certain problematic that is related to New Age, and as such it can perhaps show us why the relationship between New Age and 'official religion' is often a problematic one.

We can actually barge right into this subject by saying that New Age has a tendency to 'scratch away' some of the itchy parts of religion. New Age literature often seems to want to concern itself only with the beauty of the rose, and not with the thorns. Of course people all through history have liked messages that promised them nothing but beauty, but all through history people have also been disillusioned when they figured out that that beauty is not so readily attainable as the message often seems to pretend. In that sense New Age often seems to focus a bit hard on the fact that everybody who has a bit of openness to the spiritual can become enlightened, but it tends to forget to mention that it also needs a lot of sincere effort in which some hardships have to be overcome to attain that enlightenment. 'Official' (in the sense that they are uttered by official institutes, accredited theologians, academics, etc.) religious accounts on the other hand perhaps tend to overemphasize the fact that it is difficult to become enlightened and in so doing sometimes forget the beauty it is all about.

That way 'official' religion, to the New Ager, often seems to get lost in discussing matters that do not really matter, and New age, to the 'official' religion seems to pretend to know things on the basis of naive assumptions.

Love is of course a key word in both official religious accounts and New Age and it is the perfect example of this. New Age accounts will sometimes claim that religious institutes do not see that 'Love' is what it is all about. That is why Rumi is so readily usable in New Age. Rumi speaks so often of love that all else seems but details. Rumi has such nice sounding poetry that a lot of the West seems to understand (or at least like) it without much effort. Rumi is one that a lot of New Age ideas can use as an authoritative figure to show that "that is what religion is all about" because Rumi comes from the side of 'official religion'.

And they are right. Rumi can be used in that way. They only often leave out the fact that Rumi is an authority in the 'official religion' as well because he most certainly does not deny any of the other aspects that come with 'official religion'. Rumi was a Muslim. And as such Rumi was a follower of Mohammed. Which means that he tried to be as good a Muslim as he possible could.

That of course implies that you cannot call yourself a 'follower of Rumi' just because you like the fact that he talks about love. You can only be a real follower of Rumi if you follow him in being a good Muslim as well. You can of course simply be inspired by Rumi and his writings, but then you should not make abundant use of his writings to prove a certain point, because then you simply pull him out of your context to fulfill your own needs.

So to go one step further, to call yourself a Sufi for example, it is not enough to say that God is Love, you also need to be a good Muslim (and for example not drink alcohol) and do the things a Sufi does (for example performing Zikr and renouncing a lot of earthly desires). It is therefore difficult for people who feel themselves belonging to 'official religion' to take serious someone who claims to be a Sufi to sound spiritual and interesting during a nice evening dinner, drinking wine and not pronouncing any of Gods names a single time.

Of course this does not imply that you should stop drinking and perform Zikr to be a good spiritual person. Not at all. But you can not claim to be a Sufi if you don't.

This reminds me of a conversation I had with somebody who followed Ravi Shankar, a nowadays very popular Indian Guru. She claimed that according to Ravi Shankar it was a time of spiritual awakening. Spirituality has now become something for everybody (which is exactly what the term New Age is originally all about). Therefore there is no need anymore for a spiritual class of people who would go through live as ascetics or monks. There is no need in this new spiritual age to be celibate or poor, because we should now all consider ourselves to be monks. To be a monk means to walk the spiritual path, not to practice celibacy and renouncement of wealth.

Now, however beautiful this might sound, it is also not correct. To be a monk DOES mean to practice celibacy and to renounce wealth. That is exactly the definition of the word. If you do not, then you can not claim to be a monk. You of course do not have to be a monk to be spiritual. But if you are spiritual without celibacy and wealth-renouncement then you simply are a spiritual person. And that is of course all fine. Why would there be a need to call yourself a monk? To be a monk is not to claim that you're higher or further on the path of spirituality. Not at all. To be a monk is to claim that you are celibate and renounce wealth because of spiritual or religious reasons. You can of course do so. And the term applicable to people who do so is "monk". The ones who do not, simply do not, and therefore can not be called "monk". But of course both the monk and the not-monk can be spiritual or religious. And the same can be said about the Sufi and the non-Sufi.

Being a Sufi thus implies certain things. Amongst others it implies to belong to a Sufi group that has an unbroken link from Sheik on Sheik. In the case of Rumi's Mevlevi order, as far as I know, this link has been broken. Therefore there are no real Mevlevi's anymore. Why then, one has to wonder, can you find so many different Mevlevi or Sufi Orders in the West? The 'Mevlevi Order of America', the 'Sufi Order International', the 'Sufi Foundation of America', and so on. A bit peculiar perhaps.

Where does the need come from to belong to a traditional spiritual concept, if the claim is that modern spirituality crosses those boundaries? It is a strange matter in New Age.

Perhaps it is because they do not want to take the choice of 'fully' dedicating their lives to divine. Perhaps they sense that being a Sufi or a monk exists exactly in totally surrendering to the quest for God. And that might seem a bit scary. Again, I do not think you have to be a Sufi or a monk to be able to dedicate your whole life to the search of the divine. Everybody can decide to do this in their own conscience. It is only so that one who claims to be a Sufi or a monk should be fully aware that he makes it clear to the outside world that he indeed does so. Then it is not personal anymore, but it becomes a social thing. And maybe that is why some New Age people want to do it. It gives them a certain 'social spiritual status'. But I'm afraid that such a desire, if it indeed exists, goes against the very concept of Sufism or being a monk.

Being a monk or a Sufi is about 'promising' to deal with all the difficulties a spiritual life might confront you with. It is not about simply claiming to be spiritual, it is about ACTING religious. And thus to be a good Sufi you also have to deal with your religious background, and that in essence is a Muslim one. Being a real Sufi means you should also deal with the thorns and not just with the beauty of the rose. And that is why true Sufi's or monks, to my knowledge, never (or very seldom) step out of the religious community they belong to.

Of course to belong to an 'official' religious community does not make the community or institute all of the sudden more important than Love. It does not mean that love is not the essence of religion, it merely implies that the Sufis and monks realise that such Love does not exist in a void. That it can not be pulled out of its context. That being really spiritual indeed means that you also will have to wrestle with the difficult aspects that a true spiritual or religious life inevitably will bring.

It is of course good that New Age realizes that everybody CAN be spiritual, without being a monk or a Sufi. And of course Love, and specifically Universal Love, is something we all should be able to experience (it wouldn't be very universal otherwise). But that does not mean we can experience it without effort. And THAT is ALSO the message of Rumi. Perhaps some New Age people who often make use of Rumi should read more parts of his poetry where he explains this.

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