

Fethullah Gülen: Following in the Footsteps of Rumi

by Thomas Michel on 22 November 2007. Posted in Peaceful Coexistence

Abstract

The writings of Jalal al-Din Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystical poet and founder of the Mevlevi Sufi confraternity, have influenced the thinking and behaviour of many Muslims down to our own times. One of the modern Muslims who have appropriated Rumi's attitudes and integrated them into their own understanding of Islamic faith and practice is the Turkish scholar and religious leader, Muhammad Fethullah Gülen. The correspondence of Mevlana to Gülen is that of kindred spirits who, across the centuries, share an interpretation of the Qur'anic message as well as a commitment to communicate that message effectively to people of their respective ages. In his sermons and written works, Gülen frequently cites Rumi's behavior and attitudes to illustrate his message; in the book *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Gülen cites Rumi over 15 times to exemplify his themes of civilizational dialogue. In his work on the *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, Gülen cites Mevlana more often than any other saint or spiritual writer as he seeks to initiate the seeker into the mysteries of God's love. What does Mevlana mean for Fethullah Gülen? Where does he see the affinity between his own understanding of Islam and that expounded and exemplified by Rumi? What are the lessons that can be learned from Rumi? Why does Gülen consider Rumi a worthy exemplar for the modern Muslim? The answers to these questions can be found in four areas. Firstly, for Gülen, Rumi is one of the great figures of tolerance and dialogue in Islamic history; modern Muslims can learn from Rumi's 'compass openness'. Secondly, Rumi is a model of holiness, one of the great saints produced by Islam. Thirdly, Mevlana's longing for God makes him an instructive example for all those who thirst for a relationship of greater intimacy with God. Finally, Rumi is the teacher of the many virtues need by conscientious Muslims at all times.

1. The need for a modern spirituality

Among the medieval mystical poets, the one who speaks most clearly and directly to the modern world is Jalaluddin Rumi, known simply in the Muslim world as "Mevlana," Our Master. The depth of his spiritual experience, his original and arresting poetic images, his obvious sincerity and openheartedness, and his ability to transcend cultures, time periods, and religions, all go together to make Mevlana one of the most accessible and influential of Muslim thinkers who speak to us from the past.

The number of internet webpages devoted to translations of Rumi's poetry into European languages is evidence of the extent to which Mevlana is known and loved in the West, but in the Muslim world, the influence of Mevlana on modern thinkers and scholars, as upon the ordinary Muslim worshiper, must not be underestimated. While those who can read and appreciate his poetry in the original Persian may be relatively few, Mevlana's works are known through poetry recitations, classical

performances of their musical settings, and through the many translations of his poetry into Turkish, Arabic, Urdu and other Muslim languages. I have seen verses of Rumi decorating dishes, wood panels, horse carts and their modern equivalent, minibuses. The dervishes of the Mevlevi *tariqa* communicate, through their solemn whirling prayer, a non-verbal way message of Rumi's experience of tolerance, peace, and deep absorption in the Divine.

One of the modern Muslims who have appropriated Rumi's attitudes and integrated them into their own understanding of Islamic faith and practice is the Turkish scholar and religious leader, Muhammad Fethullah Gülen. The correspondence of Mevlana to Gülen is that of kindred spirits who, across the centuries, share an interpretation of the Qur'anic message as well as a commitment to communicate that message effectively to people of their respective ages. In his sermons and written works, Gülen frequently cites Rumi's behavior and attitudes to illustrate his message; in the book *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Gülen cites Rumi over 15 times to exemplify his themes of civilizational dialogue. In his work on the *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, Gülen cites Mevlana more often than any other saint or spiritual writer as he seeks to initiate the seeker into the mysteries of God's love.

What does Mevlana mean for Fethullah Gülen? Where does he see the affinity between his own understanding of Islam and that expounded and exemplified by Rumi? What are the lessons that can be learned from Rumi? Why does Gülen consider Rumi a worthy exemplar for the modern Muslim? I believe that the answers to these questions can be found in four areas.

2. 1. Rumi as the model of tolerance and dialogue

In discussing Said Nursi's proposal to undertake dialogue and cooperation with true Christians, Gülen states that in this Nursi is acting in a similar manner to Rumi who described himself as a compass, with one foot fixed firmly in the center while the other turns in a broad arc to complete a full circle. The foot planted resolutely in the center which never changes position is the faith conviction by which one is united to God as the unmoving heart and center of one's existence, while the other foot moves in a "broad circle that embraces all believers."^[301]

Gülen endorses Nursi's view that the days of the use of force are over; today's methods of persuasion are those of dialogue, scientific argumentation and rational debate. The "jihad of the word" focuses on rationally convincing others of the truth of one's position, not on imposing one's views by force. For Gülen, this mode of discussion is the only manner of confrontation which fits properly the nature of Islam:

The truth is that there is no harshness or bigotry in Islam. It is a religion made up entirely of forgiveness and tolerance. Such pillars of love and tolerance like Rumi, Yunus Emre^[302], Ahmed Yesevi^[303], Bediüzzaman [Said Nursi]^[304] and similar figures have expressed this aspect of Islam most beautifully and they have gone down in history as examples of this affection and tolerance.^[305]

2.2. Rumi as one of the great saints produced by Islam.

If Gülen understands Islam to be a religion consisting entirely of forgiveness and tolerance, he looks back in Islamic history at those figures who best embodied these values. Foremost among them is Mevlana, whom Gülen calls one of "the people of love."^[306] About such, he has this to say: "Being the embodiments of sincerity, Divine love, and purity of intention, the Sufi masters have become the motivating factor and the source of power behind the Islamic conquests and the Islamization of conquered lands and peoples."^[307]

For Gülen, Rumi represents the "true face of Islam," what the Islamic revelation and tradition is actually about. Gülen elaborates his point as follows: If one were to seek the true face of Islam in its own sources, history, and true representatives, then one would discover that it contains no harshness, cruelty, or fanaticism. It is a religion of forgiveness, pardon, and tolerance as such saints and princes of love and tolerance as Rumi, Yunus Emre, Ahmed Yesevi, Bediüzzaman and many others have so beautifully expressed.^[308]

Gülen notes that not every aspect of religion is of equal weight; there are some aspects which are essential and fundamental, while other aspects are occasional and peripheral. For Gülen, the essence of Islam, what the religion is really about, are values like peace, love, forgiveness and tolerance. Rumi's preeminence in the Islamic tradition derives from his eloquent espousal of the primacy of love, God's love for the believer, and the believer's love for God. A similar emphasis is found in Gülen's thought:

I can and do say that peace, love, forgiveness and tolerance are fundamental to Islam; other things are accidental. Yet, it is necessary to give priority to basic Muslim issues according to their degree of importance. For example, if God gives importance to love, if He has informed us that He loves those who love Him, and if He has given to the person He loves most the name "Habibullah," i.e., one who loves God and is loved by Him, then we have to take this as a fundamental principle. Rules like jihad against hypocrites and unbelievers are secondary matters that are necessitated by circumstances.^[309]

According to Gülen, men like Rumi and Yunus Emre have made an important cultural contribution to the Turkish people and have left their mark on Islam as understood and practiced in Turkey. The great honor and affection shown to mystical poets and saints by Turkish Muslims is evidence of the esteem in which such holy men are held and an indication of the attitudes and values according to which Islam is meant to be lived. As Gülen puts it, the message of Islam for which modern people are thirsting is its teaching of peace, tolerance and love; the mission of Muslims today is thus to invite people to discover this message by the way that Muslims themselves live their beliefs.

Even though there are naturally exceptions, the interpretations of Islam held by Turkish scholars are tolerant. If we can spread the understanding of Islam held by the pillars of affection like Rumi and Yunus Emre throughout the world, and if we can get their message of love, dialogue and tolerance to those people who are thirsting for this message, then people from all over the world will come running into the arms of this love, peace, and tolerance that we represent.^[310]

In Gülen's thinking, Rumi, Yunus Emre, and those like them represent the mainstream of Islamic thought and practice down through the centuries. There is no denying that some Muslims have at times espoused violence and coercion, but Gülen invites his followers to look to "the lovers - the people of love," as Rumi calls them, to discover and follow the example of those who have come to understand Islam as a message of love. He cites Rumi's famous invitation:

*"Come, come and join us, as we are the people of love devoted to God!
Come, come through the door of love and join us and sit with us.
Come, let us speak one to another through our hearts.
Let us speak secretly, without ears and eyes.
Let us laugh together without lips or sound, let us laugh like the roses.
Since we are all the same, let us call each other from our hearts,
We won't use our lips or tongue."^[311]*

In quoting these lines of Rumi, notes that according to the logical principles of Greek thought or Western philosophy, such words are nonsense. How can people converse without ears and eyes? How can they share laughter without expression or sound? How can they call to one another without lips or tongue? However, Rumi insists that "the people of love" can do just that, and Gülen is suggesting that this ancient skill of lovers' is one that needs to be rediscovered by modern people. "As we are all limbs of the same body," he affirms, "we should cease this duality that violates our very union. We should clear the way to unite people; this is one of the greatest ways in which God grants people success in this world, and how He transforms this world into a Paradise."^[312]

2.3. Rumi as the saint who longed to be united to God.

For Gülen, Mevlana is someone who was able to express the fundamental pain and sorrow of human life in this world. For Rumi, that pain is rooted in the separation of the soul from its deepest desire, that is, for unity with the Divine Beloved. This yearning of the soul for its true home forms the opening verses of Rumi's masterwork, the *Mathnawi*: "Listen to the reed and the tale it tells, how it sings of separation "

To Rumi, the notes of the flute are like the sound of human groans, and readers of the *Mathnawi* are invited to imagine the reed flute being cut and plucked from its roots in the reed bed. Its sad sounds represent the longing of the reed flute to return to its origins where it feels it belongs. The application of this image to the human condition is not hard to conceive for, like the flute, the human soul has been snatched from its true home in the presence of God; it is presently wandering lost and far from home and is forever longing to return to the source from which it had sprung. Gülen likens the melancholy human yearning for God to the mournful sounds of the flute, as in the opening verses of the *Mathnawi*, or to the distant squeaking of a water wheel, as in the imagery of Yunus Emre.

Zeal and yearning can be divided into two categories. The first is the yearning produced by separation from the Beloved after meeting with and gazing upon Him in the past eternity. The sighs that Rumi's flute uttered and the creaking, painful sounds heard by Yunus Emre from the revolving

water-wheel express such a separation. These sighs will continue until the final union or meeting with Him.^[313]

Such sorrow and feelings of separation are felt only by those who know God directly. Someone who has been blessed by being allowed to experience oneness with the Divine Lover will be like a "spiritual drunkard," living from then on with a longing to be fully united to the Beloved. Gülen notes that only one who has reached this rank of sanctity can properly describe the profundity of his thoughts and feelings. He cites Rumi's verses in the *Mathnawi* to illustrate his point: "Those illusions are traps for saints, whereas in reality they are the reflections of those with radiant faces in the garden of God."^[314]

Gülen's point, beautifully expressed by Rumi, is that the longing to be united with God produces a sorrow and world-weariness which to those who did not know better would appear as unhappiness and despair. Those who have not been initiated into the mysteries of Divine love must necessarily judge by appearances rather than the deeper reality. However, for those who have arrived at the truth, like Mevlana, they see that such superficial sadness masks the radiant faces of those who have come into the "garden of God," that is, God's loving presence.

Gülen makes the point elsewhere that the longing and sorrow expressed by Rumi truly embody the human condition, the state of distance and lack of fulfilment in which we all live. Absence, it is true, makes the heart grow fonder, but the deepest desire of our hearts cannot be achieved here on earth. Whether or not we are aware of it, we are all longing to be in that loving union with God which is true peace and our heart's true home. Until that is achieved, no one can be satisfied with transient and ephemeral substitutes. As Gülen states:

Our tongues speak sometimes of love and sometimes of weariness; though love and weariness cause pain to others, in them we always hear, like Rumi, the poem of longing for the realm that we have left to come here. Love and weariness to us are like a plea from the tongue of the soul, stemming from a sorrowful desire for eternity.^[315]

The other side of the coin consists of those fleeting moments of joy by which God blesses the one who is seeking to be united with Him. Gülen notes: "Since our beliefs and feelings take us to the magical worlds of beyond, we almost always feel sadness and joy intertwined; we hear the sounds of crying and laughing as different notes of the same melody." Rumi refers to these experiential states of soul (*hal/ihwal*) as the "wedding night," depicting the state of grace when those on the spiritual path find themselves rushing headlong to embrace the Beloved.

"They try to find satisfaction for the desire of reunion in their soul. They keep running toward Him, sometimes flying, sometimes limping on the ground, unified with everyone and everything."^[316] Gülen points out that the same image of the wedding night, the fulfillment of love, is used by Mevlana to indicate death, when the seeker, freed from the shackles of mortality and earthly bonds, transcends all obstacles separating the soul from a loving union with the Divine Beloved.

Sorrow which arises from separation from the Beloved and which gives rise to a longing to return to God is the source of greater love and happiness in one's life. The pain of separation from God must not be rejected or denied, but rather accepted as expressive of the human state and a strong motivation for a fuller absorption in the Divine. Rumi puts it as follows:

*"I've broken through to longing now,
filled with a grief I have felt before, but never like this.
The center leads to love . . .
Hold on to your particular pain. That too can take you to God."*

One must not think that Rumi, in his day, and Gülen, in modern times, are proposing a life-denying spirituality in which a person turns one's back on the exigencies of reality and practical living in this world. Gülen quotes Mevlana to say:

*One wise and sensible prefers the bottom of the well,
For the soul finds delight in privacy (to be with God).
The darkness of the well is preferable to the darkness people cause...
One must seclude oneself from others, not from the Beloved.*^[317]

In his commentary on these verses, Gülen explains that the purpose of seclusion is to purify the heart of all love which is not for God so that one might live united with the Beloved in the midst of daily activities. This is a restatement of what is affirmed in the compass image, portraying the true lover as one whose union with God frees him to embrace humanity wholeheartedly. As Gülen explains:

Those who always feel themselves in the presence of God do not need to seclude themselves from people. Such people, in the words of Rumi, are like those who keep one foot in the sphere of Divine commandments and turn the other, like a compass needle, throughout the world. They experience ascension and descent at every moment. This is the seclusion recognized and preferred by the Prophets and saints.^[318]

2.4. Rumi as teacher of virtue.

Gülen also sees Mevlana as one who teaches and exemplifies the virtues needed to progress on the path toward a union of love and will with God. He enlists Rumi's advice at the very beginning of the spiritual path and cites Mevlana's words on the need for *repentance*. If one does not feel remorse and disgust for errors committed and if one is not apprehensive of falling back into one's old ways of living, in short, if one has not made a serious act of repentance, one's persistence in following the spiritual path will be shallow and unstable. Gülen sites Rumi as follows on the need for a deep commitment to repent :

*I have repented and turned to God so sincerely
that I will not break [the vow of repentance] until my soul leaves my body.
In fact, who other than an ass steps toward perdition
after having suffered so much trouble [on account of his sins]?*^[319]

A second virtue essential for progress in spiritual life is that of *sincerity*. It is so easy to fool oneself and even easier to deceive others that if one is not sincere, one may find oneself performing religious duties to be seen by others. As Rumi puts it:

*You should be sincere in all your deeds,
So that the Majestic Lord may accept them.
Sincerity is the wing of the bird of the acts of obedience.
Without a wing, how can you fly to the abode of prosperity?*^[320]

Gülen elaborates on this by adding two *hadiths* from the Prophet in which he states: "Be sincere in your religion; a little work (with sincerity) is enough for you," and "Be sincere in your deeds, for God only accepts what is done with sincerity."

A third virtue stressed by Rumi is *humility*. Rumi does not present himself as a great saint or someone who has achieved a deep spiritual level, but sees himself rather as a simple servant of God. He reiterates his servant status to emphasize his standing before God:

*I have become a servant, become a servant, become a servant;
I have bowed and doubled myself up with serving You.
Servants or slaves rejoice when they become emancipated;
Whereas I rejoice when I become a servant of You.*^[321]

Gülen is aware, as was Rumi before him, that spiritual pride, or boasting about one's religious experiences, is an all-too-common failing among those involved in religious practices, a fault which leads to an arrogant service of oneself rather than of God. Gülen quotes Rumi regarding this danger to the effect: If the king's courtier behaves in an affected manner to attract the king's attention, you must not attempt to do so, for you do not have the document (to justify your doing so). O one who cannot be freed from the restrictions of this transient life, how can you know what (the stations of) annihilation, drunkenness, and expansion mean?^[322]

In commenting on these words of Rumi, Gülen affirms that "It is impossible for those imprisoned in the body to be aware of spirituality. We should ask those souls who have burned and been 'roasted' many times in the fire of the love of God about the pains of a heart that has been cleft open, and their expansion and contraction." Expansion (*bast*) and contraction (*qabd*) of the soul are states taught by Sufi masters and experienced by practitioners on the path to holiness. It is not only Muslim mystics like Rumi who have spoken and written about these states of soul. There is much in common, for example, between the Sufis explanation of *qabd* and John of the Cross' description of the Dark Night of the Soul.

One could go on at length to multiply instances of how Fethullah Gülen employs the teaching of Jalal al-Din Rumi to teach the practical virtues needed for a rich spirituality. In his work, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, Gülen refers to Rumi more often than to any other spiritual author. He cites the advice of Mevlana to illustrate his teaching on *poverty* ("Poverty is the essence and all else is form; poverty is a remedy and all else the disease," p. 171); on the need for *austerity* and periods

of *retreat* ("In the early days of his initiation, Rumi underwent many forty-day periods of austerity in seclusion; however, when he found a true, perfect master, he left seclusion for the company of people," p. 17); and the value of temporary *seclusion* ("One must seclude oneself from others, not from the Beloved; fur is worn in winter, not in spring," p. 18).

Similarly, Gülen enlists the authority of Rumi to underline the importance of *self-supervision* ("Rumi regards self-supervision as a protecting screen from evil emotions, thoughts, passions, and acts, and considers it the safest way to be attentive to Divine rights," p. 58); *truthfulness* ("The truthfulness of a lover affects even the lifeless; why then should it be found strange that it affects man's heart?" p. 86), and *reliance* on God (p. 70). Rumi offers the criteria for judging the *value of work* (p. 126) and for appreciating a proper attitude toward *worldly possessions* (p. 43).

*What is the world? It is heedlessness of God'
Not clothes, nor silver coin, nor children, nor women.
If you have worldly possessions in the name of God,
Then the Messenger said: How fine is the property a righteous man has!
The water in a ship causes it to sink,
But the water under it causes it to float.*^[323]

Gülen uses Rumi's parable of the grain of wheat to illustrate the nature of patience. "In order to be sustenance for man a grain of wheat must be buried in the bosom of the earth, germinate under it, and grow to emerge into the air. It must come into the air after a fierce struggle with the earth, and then be sown and threshed and ground in a mill. After that, it must be kneaded, baked in an oven, and, finally, chewed by teeth, sent into the stomach and digested" (p. 103). To a Christian, this parable calls to mind the words of Jesus in John's Gospel, "Truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). In Rumi's poetry the image of the grain buried in the earth is a symbol of the patient unfolding of natural processes, while in Jesus' words, the grain of wheat symbolizes "dying to oneself" in order to rise to service of others.

It is clear from Gülen's writings that he has spent much time perusing the poetry of Rumi and has reflected deeply on his spiritual insights. It is not an exaggeration to say that Gülen is a modern Muslim thinker and activist whose life work of promoting an Islamic appreciation of love, tolerance, and universal peace is in fact a renewed interpretation for our times of the central insights of Mevlana. Gülen sees himself, not as an innovator, but as a Muslim scholar firmly within the Islamic tradition represented by the "lovers" like Jalal al-Din Rumi, Yunus Emre, Ahmad Yasawi, and Said Nursi.

In many of his writings, Gülen composes paeans to love as the central motivating force of his life. For example, he states:

We have been brought up in an atmosphere in which the victories of love are in our eyes and the sound of the drums of love resounds in our hearts. Our hearts beat with excitement when we see the flag of love waving. We have become so intertwined with love that our lives become purely

dependent on love, and we dedicate our souls to it. When we live, we live with love, and when we die, we die with love. In every breath, we feel it with our whole existence; it is our warmth in the cold, and our oasis in the heat.^[324]

One can give the last word to Our Master Rumi himself to show the attraction of Rumi's thought for modern Muslim thinkers like Fethullah Gülen. Rumi's words unknowingly reveal why his poetry continues to be perused and reflected upon by Gülen and his disciples: "Stay in the company of lovers. Those kinds of people, they each have something to show you."

[301] M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Light: Somerset, N.J., 2004, p. 199.

[302] The poet Yunus Emre, 1238-1320, was one of the first mystical poets to compose his works in the spoken Turkish of the time.

[303] Ahmad Yesevi (Yasawi), from modern-day Kazakhstan, was the first Sufi poet to write his mystical works in Turkish. He founded a Sufi confraternity, the Yasawiyya, which has been widely diffused throughout the Turkic world.

[304] Said Nursi, 1878-1960, a prominent scholar and author of the *Risale-i Nur*, a 6600-page commentary on the Qur'an which has influenced millions of modern Muslims. Fethullah Gülen came to know Nursi's writings at the age of twenty. He describes Nursi as follows: "An Islamic scholar of the highest standing with deep spirituality, a wide knowledge of modern science and the contemporary world. He believed that humanity could be saved from its crises and could achieve true progress and happiness only by knowing its true nature and by recognizing and submitting to God."

[305] Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p. 179.

[306] *Ibid.* p. 93.

[307] M. Fethullah Gülen, *Prophet Muhammad: The Infinite Light*, Izmir: Kaynak, 1998, 2: 154.

[308] *Toward a Global Civilization*, pp. 58-59.

[309] *Toward a Global Civilization*, pp. 71-72.

[310] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[311] M. Fethullah Gülen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, Fairfax, Va.: The Fountain, 1999, p. 6.

[312] *Ibid.* p. 7.

[313] M. *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, p. 157.

[314] Key Concepts, p. 15.

[315] Toward a Global Civilization, p. 155.

[316] Ibid., p. 97.

[317] Key Concepts, p. 18-19.

[318] Ibid., p. 19.

[319] Ibid. p. 3.

[320] Ibid. pp. 61-62.

[321] Ibid., p. 55.

[322] Ibid., p. 116.

[323] Ibid., p. 43.

[324] Toward a Global Civilization, p. 4.