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# Sahl Tustarī's (d. 283/896) Esoteric Qur'ānic Commentary and Rūmī's *Mathnawī*: Part 1

MARYAM MUSHARRAF AND LEONARD LEWISOHN



## FOREWORD

Perhaps because one of the main didactic purposes of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is to elucidate and expound the esoteric meanings of Islam's sacred scripture, he often refers to his grand poem as the 'Decoder of the Qur'ān' (*Kashshāf al-Qur'ān*). In fact, one of the main reasons why the *Mathnawī* is such a rich depository of scriptural exegesis and spiritual wisdom is precisely because of its focus on exegesis of the Qur'ān. Being himself a learned exegete of the Muslim scripture, no doubt he had access to all the various resources and texts of Qur'ān commentary available to other scholars of his day. Yet the bases of the exegetical method that Mawlānā Rūmī propounded still remain unclear.

Unfortunately, most scholars who have studied the *Mathnawī*'s interpretation of the Qur'ān have paid more attention to Mawlānā's use of traditional commentaries and disregarded the influence of mystical exegeses of the Qur'ān on his poem. Despite the fact that eminent authorities on the poetry of Rūmī, such as Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar and 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb, have drawn attention to Mawlānā's fascination with the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān, to date no systematic attempt has yet been made to evaluate the impact of early esoteric Qur'ān exegeses upon the *Mathnawī*. This essay aims to do just that, hopefully to serve as a preamble to further, more elaborate, investigations of Mawlānā's poetic use and adaptation of mystical interpretations of the Qur'ān.

In what follows, we rely mainly on two great works of mystical exegesis. The first is Sahl ibn 'Abdullāh al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) *Exegesis of the Tremendous Qur'ān* (*Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-azīm*),<sup>1</sup> which is probably

<sup>1</sup> Sahl ibn 'Abdullāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Muḥammad Baṣīl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya 1423/2001); see also Sahl ibn 'Abdullāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*

the earliest independent mystical interpretation of the Muslim scripture. The second is Abū 'Abdu'l-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's (d. 412/1021) *The Spiritual Realities of Qur'ānic Exegesis* (*Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*), which contains selections from Tustarī's work as well as from other works by other great mystical commentators.<sup>2</sup> We will endeavour to expose some of the prominent similarities between the exegetical methods used by Mawlānā in the *Mathnawī* on the one hand and these two esoteric commentaries on the other. We will also try to show how Tustarī's and Sulamī's esoteric methods of interpreting the Qur'ān can improve our understanding of the *Mathnawī*, hopefully thus revealing the reason why Mawlānā described his *Mathnawī* as a 'Decoder of the Qur'ān'.

\* \* \*

His predication of the *Mathnawī* as being a 'Decoder of the Qur'ān' in the prelude of Book I of the poem itself indicates that he was interested in discovering the inner meaning of the Qur'ān according to the methods of mystical interpretation that influenced him. In fact, in his interpretation of most verses from the Qur'ān, Mawlānā undertakes an esoteric approach. It is clear that Aflākī's report that Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* was venerated by Mawlānā as a great specimen of this type of interpretation was by no means an idle anecdote that one can dismiss as fantastical, even though his hagiography was composed some seventy years after Rūmī's death.<sup>3</sup>

Still, it remains unclear how extensively Mawlānā utilized such well-known mystical commentaries in his mystical poetry. Quoting certain statements by Aflākī in this regard,<sup>4</sup> Zarrīnkūb underlines that Mawlānā

*al-azīm*, ed. M. B. al-Na'sānī al-Ḥalabī (Cairo: Maṭb'a Sa'āda 1329/1908). We will be largely using the translation of this text by Annabel and Ali Keeler, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2011), with minor modifications.

<sup>2</sup> Abū 'Abdu'l-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī wa huwa Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid 'Umrān (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya 1422/2001). Wherever possible, we will be making use of the partial translation of this text by Farhana Mayer: *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qur'ān Commentary Ascribed to Ja'far al-Šādiq as Contained in Sulamī's Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr from the Text of Paul Nuyia* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Aflākī states that Mawlānā gave away his cloak in gratitude to a scribe who had copied out the whole manuscript of the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* for him: see Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad-i Aflākī, *Manāqib al-ārīfīn*, ed. Tahsin Yazıcı, 3rd edition, 2 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi 1959; reprinted Tehran: Dunyā-yi Kitāb 1375 A.Hsh./1996), vol. II, pp. 604–605.

<sup>4</sup> 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb, *Sirr-i nay* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī 1384 A.Hsh./2005), I, p. 347.

paid a great deal of attention to researching various methods of the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān. Zarrīnkūb judges that the frequency and variety of scriptural verses cited in the *Mathnawī* to be so extensive that, he claims, it would be by no means an exaggeration to call the *Mathnawī* itself a kind of mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Zarrīnkūb does not furnish us with any samples of Sulamī's, Tustarī's, or any other famous mystical commentaries when citing examples of Rūmī's mystical exegesis of the Qur'ān, nor does he clarify precisely how such *tafsīrs* might have affected the poet.

In his description of Qur'ānic references within the *Mathnawī*'s verses, Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar likewise makes note of Mawlānā's reference to the *Laṭa'if al-ishārāt*, the mystical commentary on the Qur'ān by Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074). However, he neither explains nor explores *how* Mawlānā actually made use of the *Laṭa'if*.<sup>6</sup> In the course of his exposition, Furūzānfar only cites Qushayrī's *Risāla* on Sufism, not his mystical commentary, so ultimately his discussion raises more questions than it answers.

Nevertheless, Furūzānfar does not disregard the attention paid to mystical commentaries by members of Mawlānā's family and his intellectual followers. Indicating elsewhere the importance of esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ān in the *Gnostic Intimations (Ma'ārif)* by Rūmī's father, Bahā' al-Dīn Valad (628/1231), Furūzānfar states that one of the most important aspects of that text is that it 'reveals the secrets of that celestial scripture [the Qur'ān]'. He compares its exegetical approach with methods of mystical interpretation employed by the likes of Sulamī, Qushayrī, Qūnavī, and 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, while referring to Bahā' al-Dīn Valad's method as being much simpler and certainly more enjoyable.<sup>7</sup>

Although all the great commentators on the *Mathnawī* have always stressed the importance of the impact of quotation and interpretation

5 *Sirr-i nay*, II, p 373; see also his *Bahr dar kūza: naqd u tafsīr-i qissahā va tamthīlāt-i Mathnawī*, 7th edition (Tehran: Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī 1376 A.Hsh./1997), p. 40.

6 Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī-yi sharīf*, (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Tehran 1346 A.Hsh./1967), vol. 1, editor's introduction, p. 9.

7 Bahā' al-Dīn Valad, *Ma'ārif: Majmū'a-yi mavā'iz va sukhānān-i Sulṭān al-'ulamā' Bahā al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn-i Khaṭībī-yi Balkhī*, ed. Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Idāra-yi Kull-i Intibā'āt-i Vizārat-i Farhang 1955 and 1959; reprinted Tehran: Ṭahūrī 1352 A.Hsh./1973), editor's introduction, pp. y-b; Fritz Meier, *Bahā'-yi Valad*, trans. (German into Persian) Maryam Musharraf (Tehran Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī 1382 A.Hsh./2003), editor's introduction, p 13.

of verses from the Qur'ān upon the poem and have even written numerous works comparing the Islamic scripture with the *Mathnawī*,<sup>8</sup> in general no attention to date has been devoted to the impact of other mystical commentaries upon the *Mathnawī*. The probable reason for this is that Mawlānā did not himself consider it necessary, when citing Qur'ānic verses, to provide chapter and verse references back to the Qur'ān in the other mystical commentaries that he drew upon, such as Sulamī's *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*, Tustarī's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Qushayrī's *Lata'if al-ishārāt*, or Maybudī's *Kashf al-asrār*. The only way one can discover the sources of his adaptations from such texts is by immersing and familiarizing oneself in the study of these commentaries through continuous reading of them over the course of years of study. Another obstacle to this type of research is that most of these mystical commentaries lack good critical editions, which makes them even more difficult to use. In this respect, the efforts of a number of Western scholars to edit these foundational commentaries should be highlighted here. In particular, the role played by Louis Massignon and Paul Nywia in editing and publishing some parts of *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*, and the works of G. Böwering in editing the Qur'ān commentaries of Tustarī and Sulamī (see the bibliography) are to be commended.

8 The reason that most works of interpretation or commentary on the *Mathnawī* feature special indices of verses from the Qur'ān and that various scholars have focused so much on the grand poem's particular method of Qur'ānic *tafsīr* is that basically it is impossible to interpret the *Mathnawī* without reference to the Qur'ān. It is nonetheless surprising that in all these writings – and even in books specifically devoted to the subject of references to verses of the Qur'ān in the *Mathnawī* – the phenomenon of the *mystical interpretation* of the Qur'ān is always omitted. For example, in Tilmidh Ḥusayn's *Mirāt al-Mathnawī* (albeit a very valuable work), in the part allocated to introducing verses from the Qur'ān in the *Mathnawī*, no mention of the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān appears. The same can be said about all the most recent books published in Persian on this subject, such as 'Alī Ridhā Mirzā Muḥammad, *Qur'ān dar Mathnawī*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Pazhūhishgāh-i 'ulūm-i insānī va muṭāla'āt-i farhangī 1387 A.Hsh./2004) and Bahā' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī and Siyāmāk Mukhtārī, *Qur'ān va Mathnawī: Farhangvāra-yi ta'thīr-i āyāt-i Qur'ān dar adabiyāt-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatra 1384 A.Hsh./2005), as well as other separate lexicons about Qur'ānic passages and verses in the *Mathnawī*, such as Maḥmūd Dargāhī, *Āyāt-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr 1377 A.Hsh./1998), which are largely based on previously published lexicons. These books have generally tried to classify and reinterpret earlier interpretations of the same theme, republishing these in a new, updated format. However, for the student who wishes to understand how the traditional *mystical interpretation* of the Qur'ān in the *Mathnawī* is presented, they are of little use.

Despite the fact that these great scholars were not specialists in Rumi's *Mathnawī*, their endeavours are indirectly quite relevant to the study of the *Mathnawī*, since it is partially because of their work on the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān commentaries of Tustarī and Sulamī that the present research on the influence of these exegeses upon Mawlānā's *Mathnawī* has been undertaken. On the basis of their publications in print today, and other recent scholarly studies conducted on the manuscripts relating to the Qur'ān commentaries of Sulamī and Tustarī in particular, what follows below represents a preliminary attempt at exploring this new field of study.

Scholars acknowledge that the writings of Sahl Tustarī comprise one of earliest formulations of Sufi mystical teachings, recognizing that his commentary on the Qur'ān is one of the most important ever written, especially regarding its establishment of a speculative framework to the science of *tafsīr* in early Sufism. Tustarī, who flourished four centuries before Rumi, influenced the author of the *Mathnawī* through the medium of a number of important thinkers. First and foremost of these was of course Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), whose Sufi theology had a great impact on the poetry of Abū'l-Majd Majdūd ibn Ādam Sanā'ī (d. 525/1131) – Rumi's precursor in many respects, as the Sage of Konya himself frequently acknowledges. We should also recall, as was mentioned above, Mawlānā's interest in Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, a commentary that includes almost all of Tustarī's interpretations within it. Therefore, considering the importance and impact of Sanā'ī's poetry on Mawlānā on one hand, and his interest in the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* on the other, it is hardly surprising that we find mystical interpretations and ideas of Tustarī constantly resurfacing in the *Mathnawī*.

In what follows we have endeavoured to trace some of the salient elements and key motifs of Tustarī's thought that appear in the *Mathnawī*. The most important aspect of Tustarī's legacy passed down to Rumi were Sufi ethical and didactic teachings concerning *adab* ('courtesy', 'etiquette', 'moral rules', 'manners', 'good conduct'), the subject of many famous Sufi treatises and manuals.<sup>9</sup> Some of these

9 On *Adab* in Sufism, see Ira Lapidus, 'Knowledge, Virtue and Action: The Classical Conception of *Adab* in Islam', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984); Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *A Collection of Sufi Rules of Conduct (Jawāmī' ādab al-Ṣūfiyya)*, trans. Elena Biagi (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society

manuals, which no doubt were well known to Mawlānā (as they would have been to any mystic of his background and education), merit mention in this respect: the *Ādāb al-nufūs* by Ḥārith ibn Asād al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), the *Adab al-muftaqar ila-Allāh* attributed to Abū'l-Qāsim Junayd (d. 297/910), the *Adab al-naḥs* by Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (d.c. 295/908), and of course, the famous *Jawāmī' ādab al-Ṣūfiyya* by Abū 'Abdu'l-Raḥmān Sulamī (d. 412/1021). Another important aspect of the heritage of Sufi didactic teachings bequeathed to Mawlānā was found in mystical Qur'ān commentaries. Amongst the early Sufi authors of such commentaries the name of Sahl Tustarī stands out as a sober mystic who focused on training his disciples in the morals and manners of the Sufi Path, avoiding scandal, controversy, and sensationalism.

#### STRUGGLE AGAINST THE LOWER SOUL (*JIHĀD AL-NAḤS*)

One of the most frequently reiterated motifs in Tustarī's mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān is that of the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit, that is, between the *anima bruta* (referred to in Qur'ānic Arabic as *al-naḥs al-ammāra*: 'the soul that incites one to pursue vice') and the higher spiritual faculties in man, which include the conscience (*al-naḥs al-lawwāma*, literally: 'the soul that blames') and 'the soul at peace' with God (*al-naḥs al-muṭa'inna*). Since this motif is the central subject of all religious ethics in Islam in general and Sufi moral teachings in particular, it is appropriate if we begin our discussions here.

In many of his mystical interpretations of the Qur'ān's verses, Tustarī compares and contrasts the spiritual to the material aspects of humanity. The following two examples may serve to exemplify his approach:

And if two parties of believers fall to fighting, then make peace between them. And if one party of them does wrong to the other, fight that which does wrong till it return unto the ordinance of God; then, if it return, make peace between them justly, and act equitably. Lo! God loves the equitable (Qur'ān XLIX: 9).<sup>10</sup>

2010); F. Gabrieli, 'Adab', in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, I, pp. 175–76; Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, 'Adab, i. Adab in Iran', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I, pp. 432–39.

<sup>10</sup> Citations from the Qur'ān with minor modifications follow M. Pickthall's classic rendition: *The Glorious Koran* (London: Allen & Unwin 1976) frequently reprinted.



According to Tustarī's esoteric interpretation of this verse, the two struggling forces mentioned here are symbols for opposing faculties of the soul fighting within man:

The outward meaning of the verse is as those specialised in exegesis have explained.<sup>11</sup> However, in its inner meaning it refers to the spirit (*rūh*), intellect (*ʿaql*), heart (*qalb*), basic nature (*ṭabʿ*), desire (*hawā*) and lust (*shahwa*). If natural instinct, desire and lust take up arms against the heart, intellect and spirit, the servant must fight them with the swords of vigilance (*murāqaba*), the arrows of inspection (*muṭālaʿa*) and the lights of conformity (*muwāfaqqa*), so that the spirit and the intellect gain the upper hand, and desire and lust are vanquished.<sup>12</sup>

As we can see from his exegesis, in Tustarī's view the esoteric sense of the verse refers to the perpetual struggle between the flesh and the Spirit ongoing within man. Elsewhere in his commentary he contrasts spiritual and sensual pleasures using his own distinctive terminology, declaring that: 'heavenly pleasures and goods are the rewards for the 'natural soul' (*nafs al-ṭabʿ*), whereas realization of divine unity (*tawhīd*) and the *Visio Dei* (*liqā*) are the reward for the spiritual soul (*nafs al-rūh*)'.<sup>13</sup>

In this respect, it is illuminating to consider Tustarī's interpretation of another passage of the Qur'ān: 'And had We willed, We could have raised him by their means, but he clung to the earth and followed his own lusts' (VII: 176). Tustarī does not concentrate on the exoteric sense of the verse, which concerns the ill-fated Bal'am, son of Boer, a Canaanite descended from Lot who opposed Moses and his people,<sup>14</sup> but focuses on the inner meaning of self-abasement before God:

11 In Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2011), p. 201, n. 3, the translators provide this note: 'According to the comment on this verse in *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* the verse is alluding to the fight between two clans, those of Ibn Ubayy and Ibn Rawāʿā. It is reported that the Prophet was riding on a donkey and as it passed by Ibn Ubayy it urinated. Ibn Ubayy held his nose, whereupon Ibn Rawāʿā remarked: "By God, the smell of the donkey's urine is sweeter than your musk." Fighting then ensued between the two clans involving fists, sandals and palm branches.'

12 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, p. 149. All quotations from Tustarī cited in this article are from the excellent annotated translation of *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* by Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler cited in note 1 above. This quotation can be found on p. 201.

13 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, pp. 85–88.

14 On which see *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 78, n. 40.

The self (*nafs*) has seven heavenly veils and seven earthly veils. The more the servant buries his [lower] self in the earth the higher will his heart soar heavenwards. Furthermore, if he [completely] buries his lower self beneath the earth his heart will reach the Throne.<sup>15</sup>

The core theme of the *Mathnawī* is likewise the spiritual warfare of the Intellect with the ego-self (*nafs*), the epic struggle of the Spirit against the lower soul and its passions constituting the very warp and woof of Rumi's vast poem. Exactly how much Mawlānā owed to the previous heritage of theoretical Sufism, speculative mysticism, and esoteric Qur'ān exegesis is clear when we read the following verses:

The sensuous eye is the horse, and the Light of God is the rider: without the rider the horse itself is useless.

Therefore, train the horse (so as to cure it) of bad habits; else the horse will be rejected before the king.

The Light of God mounts (as a rider) on the sensuous eye, and then the soul yearns after God.

Go towards a sense on which the Light is riding: that Light is a good companion for the sense.

The Light of God is an ornament to the light of sense: this is the meaning of *light upon light*.

The light of sense draws (a man) towards earth; the Light of God bears him aloft,

Because sensible things are a lower world: the Light of God is (as) the sea and the sense as a dewdrop.<sup>16</sup>

Although it cannot be said that Mawlānā drew upon Tustarī's esoteric interpretation of the passages from the Qur'ān cited above (XLIX: 9; VII: 176) or quoted directly from it in these verses, the similarities between his symbolic imagery and the hermeneutical approach of Tustarī appear to be self-evident.

<sup>15</sup> *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, pp. 69–70; *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, *The Mathnawī of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac 1925–1940), Book II: 1286–87, 1290, 1292–95. All translations from the *Mathnawī* in this article are by Reynold A. Nicholson.

THE *ANIMA BRUTA* OR 'CALF OF THE LOWER SOUL'  
(*GĀV-I NAFS*)

The term *anima bruta* – or, to give the Perso-Arabic term, the 'Calf of the Lower Soul' (*gāv-i nafs*) – is used throughout both the *Mathnawī* and in certain mystical commentaries on the Qur'ān as a symbol for bodily pleasures, fleshly lusts, and carnal passions. While commenting on this Qur'ānic verse: 'And when Moses said unto his people: O my people! Ye have wronged yourselves by your choosing of the calf (for worship) so turn in penitence to your Creator, and kill yourselves' (II: 54), Sulamī cites this comment by Ibn 'Aṭā' (d. 309/921): 'The lower soul or ego-self (*nafs*) of people is their calf; whoever is able to slay this calf and struggle against their lower soul's vices and passions will be released from its torment and oppression.'<sup>17</sup> In the *'Arā'is al-bayān fī haqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, the mystical interpretation of the Qur'ān by Rūzbihān Baqlī of Shiraz (d. 606/1210), the calf symbol in this verse is likewise interpreted as an esoteric allusion to the *anima bruta* (*al-nafs al-ammāra*).<sup>18</sup>

In the various passages of the *Mathnawī* where Mawlānā refers to this particular Qur'ānic parable, he presents a virtually identical exegesis to that of Sulamī and Rūzbihān, at least in terms of imagery and ideas. For example, in Book III, he states:

Kill your fleshly soul and make the world (spiritually) alive; it (your fleshly soul) has killed its master: make it (your) slave.

. . . The fleshly soul says, 'How shouldst thou kill my "calf"? – Because the 'calf' of the fleshly soul is the (outward) form of the body.'<sup>19</sup>

In Book VI he again harks back to same theme, while referring to the tale of Moses and Golden Calf:

Like the people of Moses in the heat of Desert, thou hast remained forty years in (the same) place, O foolish man.

<sup>17</sup> Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī*, ed. 'Umrān, vol. 1, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Rūzbihān Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān fī haqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, ed. Shaykh Aḥmad Farid al-Mazidī, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya 1429/2008), vol. 1, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book III: 2504, 2509 (with minor modifications).

Daily thou marchest rapidly till nightfall and findest thyself (still) in the first stage of thy journey.

Thou wilt never traverse this three hundred years distance so long as thou hast love for the calf.

Until the fancy (illusion) of the calf went out of their hearts, the Desert was to them like a blazing pool.<sup>20</sup>

#### THE IDOL OF THE LOWER SOUL

The passions of the lower soul are so all-absorbing and enthralling that one often follows its caprices, indulges its whims, and venerates its every desire as though it were an idol. It is for this reason that the traditional Sufi adage: 'The lower soul is verily the mother of all idols' (*al-naḥṣu hiya ummu l-aṣṇām*) likens the lower soul to an idol.<sup>21</sup>

In his interpretation of the verse, 'And preserve me and my sons from serving idols' (XIV: 35), Sulamī cites a statement by Ibn 'Aṭā', who quipped that 'the idol of passion is the worst idol'.<sup>22</sup> Rumi adopts exactly the same simile in these well-known verses from the first book of the *Mathnawī*:

Inasmuch as he did not give due punishment to this idol of self, from the idol of his self the other idol was born.

The idol of your self is the mother of (all) idols, because that (material) idol is (only) a snake, while this (spiritual) idol is a dragon.<sup>23</sup>

#### ALTRUISTIC SELF-SACRIFICE AND GENEROSITY OF SOUL

The idea that true generosity lies in acts of self-sacrifice involving relinquishing bodily pleasures and extinguishing the fire of passion appears at first sight to be one of Rumi's original poetic coinages. However, on closer examination, we find that the theology underlying this doctrine is derived from traditional Sufi exegeses on this Qur'ānic

<sup>20</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book VI: 1788–91.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Nicholson's commentary on Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, Book I: 772.

<sup>22</sup> Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī*, ed. 'Umrān, vol. 1, p. 347.

<sup>23</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book II: 771–72. The various Qur'ānic, Biblical, and Sufi contexts evoked by Rumi in these verses are the subject of Nicholson's commentary on vv. 770–72.

verse: 'You will not attain to piety (*al-birr*) until ye spend of that which ye love' (III: 92). Tustarī interprets this verse to mean: 'You will not attain full piety until you go to war with your lower selves and spend of what you love', adding: 'There is no spending (*infāq*) like consuming (*infāq*) the lower soul by opposing it and by seeking the good pleasure of God, Mighty and Majestic is He.'<sup>24</sup> Tustarī's exegesis of the inner meaning of generosity here finds a direct reprise in these verses by Rumi:

Munificence is the abandonment of lusts and pleasures; no one who is sunken in lust rises up (again).

This munificence is a branch of cypress of Paradise: woe to him that lets such a branch go from his hand.<sup>25</sup>

#### FASTING AND EATING *ḤALĀL* FOOD

Throughout the *Mathnawī* Mawlānā lays considerable emphasis on the spiritual advantages to be reaped from fasting and hunger. In several passages he also stresses the importance of consumption of proper *ḥalāl* food, that is, food obtained in accordance with Islamic dietary laws. In the beginning of Book II of the *Mathnawī*, he describes the mouth as the gateway to Hell.<sup>26</sup> Hunger, on the other hand, he opines, is the sultan of all medicinal remedies, a remedy best suited to advanced spiritual adepts:

Indeed hunger is the king of medicines: hark, lay hunger to the heart, do not regard it with such contempt.

. . . Hunger is bestowed as a gift on God's elect (alone), that through hunger they may become puissant lions.<sup>27</sup>

The comparison of hunger to 'medicine' advocated by Rumi here, harks back to traditional Sufi spiritual psychology according to which

<sup>24</sup> Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 47 (with minor modifications); Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, p. 49. See also Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī*, ed. 'Umrān, vol. II, pp. 107–108. Also see Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī's interpretation of this verse in his *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār*, ed. 'Alī Aṣghar Ḥikmat, (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānishgāhī 1952–1960), vol. II, p. 207.

<sup>25</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book II: 1272–73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Book II: 12. <sup>27</sup> Ibid., Book V: 2832, 2838.

hunger was considered to be the best means to treat various ailments of the soul. In the quaternion of remedies for diseases of the soul, hunger features chief, according to both Tustarī and Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī. In his *Treatise on the Diseases of the Soul* Sulamī wrote: 'The passions of the lower soul are strengthened through satiety; satiety prompts one to seek indulgence and incites the heart to pursue its passions and pleasures and to become lethargic. Hunger, however, weakens the lower soul, dissuades it from the pursuit of pleasures and self-indulgence, so the heart can dominate and subjugate it.'<sup>28</sup>

This same notion is reiterated throughout the *Mathnawī*. In the following verses, Rumi describes food sourced by proper (*ḥalāl*) means as the source of interior illumination and wisdom:

The mouthful that gave increase of light and perfection is obtained from lawful earnings.

From the lawful morsel are born knowledge and wisdom, from the lawful morsel come out love and tenderness.

. . . The morsel is seed, and thoughts are its fruit; the morsel is the sea, and thoughts are its pearls.

From the lawful morsel in the mouth is born the inclination to serve (God) and the resolve to go to yonder world.<sup>29</sup>

Rather than simply admonishing the reader to pursue salvation by slavish adherence to the outward Muslim code of alimentation, that is, the dry doctrine of solely eating 'religiously permissible food' (*ḥalāl*), the context of this passage is far broader in meaning, containing manifold significances: (1) to avoid illegal means of securing one's livelihood and subsistence, (2) to abstain from the consumption of irresponsibly sourced food, and (3) to refrain from wasting one's time

<sup>28</sup> Sulamī, *Jawāmi' ādāb al-Ṣūfiyya* and *ʿUyub al-naḥs wa mudāwātuhā*, ed. Etan Kohlberg (Jerusalem: Mahad al-Dirāsāt al-Asiwiyyat wa'l-Afriqiyya, al-Jāmi'a al-ʿIbriyya fi al-Urshalīm, al-Maṭba'a al-Ākādimiyya 1976), paragraph 19, p. 81; see also Sulamī, *Majmū'a āthār: bakhshhā-yi az Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr va risālat-i digar*, ed. N. Pūrjavādī, 2 vols. (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Danishgāhī 1369–1372 A.Hsh./1990–1993), vol. I, p. 321.

<sup>29</sup> Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book I: 1644, 1647–48. Cf. Qushayrī's remark: 'They found the springs of wisdom in hunger', in Qushayrī, *Tarjuma-yi Risāla-yi Qushayrī* (Persian edition of *Al-Risāla al-Qushayrīyya*), trans. Abū ʿAlī Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad al-Uthmānī, ed. Badī' al-Zamān Furūzānfār (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Bungāh-i Tarjumah va Nashr-i Kitāb 1345 A.Hsh./1966), p. 212.

lest it be 'consumed' by association with base folk and thus become 'devoured' by bad thoughts. In this respect, Tustarī's interpretation of the following verse: 'Eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Lo! He loveth not the prodigals' (Qur'ān, VII: 31) merits citation and comparison:

God, Exalted is He, created the world and placed knowledge and wisdom within hunger (*jūʿ*), and placed ignorance and transgression within satiety (*shabʿ*). So, when you are hungry ask for satiety from the One who has afflicted you with hunger, and if you are satiated, ask for hunger from the One who has afflicted you with satiety, otherwise you will commit excesses and transgress. Then he recited: 'Nay, but verily man is wont to rebellious – that he thinks himself independent.'<sup>30</sup> He also said: 'Truly, hunger is a secret among the secrets of God, Exalted is He, on earth, which He does not entrust to anyone who will disseminate it.'<sup>31</sup>

When describing a Sufi teacher rebuke his disciple's dread of going hungry, Mawlānā apparently had this selfsame adage in mind when he composed these verses:

You are not (one) of the honoured favourites (of God) that you should be kept without walnuts and raisins.

Hunger is the daily bread of the souls of God's elect: how is it amenable to (in the power of) a beggarly fool like you?

Be at ease: you are not (one) of those, so that you should tarry without bread in this kitchen.<sup>32</sup>

From the citations given above, it seems evident that Rumi was influenced by Tustarī's School in which the consumption of religiously permissible food (*ḥalāl*) had special importance. In his interpretation of the verse: 'And whatsoever the messenger gives you, take it, and

<sup>30</sup> Qur'ān, XCVI: 6–7.

<sup>31</sup> Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 72 (with minor modifications); Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, p. 65. A similar statement known to Rumi was: 'Hunger is the food of God, yet none will consume it except the noble.' In Furūzānfar, *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī-yi sharīf*, p. 148; Šādiq Gawharīn, *Farhang-i lughāt va ta'bīrāt-i Mathnawī-ye Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥusayn Balkhī*, 9 vols. (Tehran: Tehran University Press 1339 A.Hsh./1960), vol. III, p. 339.

<sup>32</sup> *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, V: 2845–47 (with slight modifications).

whatsoever he forbids, abstain from it',<sup>33</sup> Tustarī commented: 'The principles of our school are three: consuming what is legitimate (*akl al-halāl*); following the example of the Messenger in his character (*akhlāq*) and actions (*af'āl*), and sincerity of intention (*ikhlās al-niyā*) in all works.'<sup>34</sup>

### THE ESOTERIC HIERARCHY

The principle of avoiding causing harm and distress to others (in Persian: *tark-i āzār*) was a doctrine of fundamental importance to the Sufis, with whole chapters of Sufi manuals often devoted to it and Sufi poets constantly reiterating it as one of their key ethical teachings.<sup>35</sup> The doctrine is ultimately traceable back to the description of the generously magnanimous nature of the friends of God given in the Qur'ān: in particular, to one verse where we read: 'And the believers, men and women, are protecting friends one of another' (IX: 71). Tustarī interpreted this verse to mean: 'A person's protective friendship (*muwālāt*) towards the believers is his avoiding doing them any harm. . . . Know that the servant does not attain true faith (*ḥaqīqat al-īmān*) until he becomes as the earth for the servants of God – it endures the suffering that they impose upon it, and they derive benefits from it.'<sup>36</sup> As these verses from the *Mathnawī* about the long-suffering patient endurance of God's friends illustrate, exactly the same ethical teaching was also of special significance to Mawlanā:

The chosen servants of God are merciful and long-suffering: they possess the disposition of God in regard to putting things right.

They are kind and bribeless ones, helpers in the hard plight and the heavy, grievous day.<sup>37</sup>

33 Qur'ān, trans. Pickthall, LIX: 7 (with minor modifications).

34 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 226; Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl p. 165.

35 For a discussion of the Sufi context of this theme in the work of one famous Persian poet (Ḥāfiz), see Leonard Lewisohn, 'The Religion of Love and the Puritans of Islam: Sufi Sources of Ḥāfiz's Anti-clericalism', in *Ḥāfiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: I. B. Tauris 2010), pp. 164–65.

36 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 84; Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, p. 73. Also cf. Sulamī, *Jawāmi'*, ed. Kohlberg, paragraph 151, p. 59.

37 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book III: 2223–24.



But God's friends (*awliyā'*) are not only endowed with sublimely altruistic ethics, they constitute a kind of esoteric pantheon who rule the world, that is, a hidden hierarchy of saints who invisibly protect humankind from tribulations, disasters and affliction. The theory of the esoteric hierarchy of God's friends or saints who secretly direct and oversee the world's affairs is elaborated throughout Sulamī's exegesis on the Qur'ān. Apropos of the following verse: 'And the earth have We spread out, and placed therein firm hills (*rawasī*)' (XV: 19), Sulamī pronounces: "The meaning of "firm hills" is the hierarchical degree and the spiritual state of God's friends, who have been appointed by God as a means to repel disasters, so that due to their position all indecent acts are prevented . . . these friends of God give shelter to, and are a source of, consolation and protection for God's servants in times of trouble and affliction."<sup>38</sup> Upon another verse: 'And We appointed from among them leaders who are guided by Our command',<sup>39</sup> Sulamī likewise cites this saying by Abu Sa'īd Kharrāz (d. 286/899): 'God's adepts who have verified the truth of things have a certain ethical pre-eminence over others. They avoid causing harm, offence or distress to others, and exhibit patience in face of affliction and tribulation. They live among others without standing out or being noticed, and even though they are the preservers of mankind, no one pays them any particular regard, which is the meaning of God's word: "We appointed from among them leaders."'

The theory of God's saints who direct the esoteric hierarchy of the world and provide assistance, both manifest and hidden, to humankind, elaborated by Sulamī above, is likewise one of the *Mathnawī*'s core themes, as these verses attest:

The valiant holy men are a help in the world when the wail of the oppressed reaches them.

From every quarter they hear the cry of the oppressed and run in that direction, like the mercy of God.

<sup>38</sup> Sulamī, *Tafsīr al-Sulamī*, ed. 'Umrān, vol. 1, p. 351. See also Sulamī's exegesis of the Qur'ān XIII: 3, in *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 326.

<sup>39</sup> Qur'ān, XXXII: 24. In the printed text, due to typographical errors, this statement is so indecipherable as to be unreadable, but it can be extrapolated from manuscript readings of the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, such as MS. Rashīd al-Dīn, fol. 158B (see Sulamī, *Ḥaqā'iq al-Tafsīr* . . .).

Those buttresses for the breaches of the world, those physicians  
for hidden maladies,  
Are pure love and justice and mercy; even as God, they are  
flawless, incorruptible and unbribed.<sup>40</sup>

#### CONCEALMENT OF FOIBLES AND CONDEMNATION OF FAULT-FINDING

Turning from the esoteric spiritual hierarchy of the invisible realm to the exoteric social structure of medieval Islamic society, another fundamental theme found throughout the commentaries of both Tustarī and Sulamī – a theme also reiterated in many places in Rumi's *Mathnawī* – is the ethical precept of overlooking the faults of others ('*ayb-pūshī*') and, simultaneously, reviling the evils of exposing the flaws of one's neighbour ('*ayb-jū'ī*').<sup>41</sup> In this respect, it is illuminating to read Tustarī's interpretation on this key verse: 'O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Ye abhor that (so abhor the other)! And keep your duty (to God). Lo! God is Relenting, Merciful.'<sup>42</sup> Asked in this context about the meaning of the Prophet's words 'Be on your guard with people, [by holding a] bad opinion (*iḥtarisu al-nās bi sū' al-ẓann*)', Tustarī replied:

The meaning of this is [that protection from people] is [gained by holding a] bad opinion of yourself, not of other people. In other words, accuse your own self for not treating them fairly in your dealings with them.<sup>43</sup> [Concerning 'And spy not . . .'], he said: 'Do not search out the faults that God has covered for His servants, for you may well be afflicted by that [fault]'. It was related of Jesus that he used to say, 'Do not speak too much other than in remembrance of God, Mighty and Majestic is He, for your hearts

40 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book II: 1933–36.

41 For a discussion of this theme in the Persian Sufi tradition see Lewisohn, 'The Religion of Love and the Puritans of Islam: Sufi Sources of Ḥāfiz's Anti-clericalism', in *Hafiz*, ed. Lewisohn, pp. 164–66.

42 Qur'ān, trans. Pickthall, XLIX: 12 (with minor modifications).

43 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Basīl, p. 150; Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 201 (with minor modifications).

will be hardened, and the heart that is hard is far from God. Do not regard the faults of people as if you were their masters, but look at your own works as if they were your slaves. Know that people are either afflicted (*mubtalā*) or preserved (*mu'āfā*), so show mercy to those who are afflicted and ask God for preservation.<sup>44</sup>

The innumerable strictures made by Mawlānā against censuring the vices of others while not censoring one's own faults is a key theme in the *Mathnawī* that would require a separate essay itself to expound. However, some of the following verses merit citation in this respect:

Do not you, then, whatsoever grief befall you, resentfully accuse any one: turn upon yourself.

Do not think evil of another, O you who gratify the desire of your friend: do not that which that slave was meditating.

. . . You also are bad and malign to others outside, while you have become complaisant to the grievous self and carnal soul within.

It is your enemy indeed, yet you are giving it candy, while outside you are accusing every one.<sup>45</sup>

Rumi's denunciation of fault-finding reappears in Book III with the following subtitle: 'Explaining what is signified by the far-sighted blind man, deaf man who is sharp of hearing, and the naked man with the long skirts.' The avarice of the far-sighted blind man, he explains, makes him utterly blind to his own faults while perfectly cognizant of others' foibles and peccadilloes:

The blind man is Greed: he sees other peoples faults, hair by hair and tells them from street to street

(But) his blind eyes do not perceive one mote of his own faults, albeit he is a fault-finder.

The naked man is afraid that his skirt will be cut off: how should they (any one) cut off the skirt of a naked man?<sup>46</sup>

44 Ibid. Cf. Sulamī, *Jawāmi*, ed. Kohlberg, nos. 141–42, p. 55; no. 88, p. 37.

45 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book IV: 1913–14, 1918–19.

46 Ibid., Book III: 2629–30.

But the friends of God are quite the opposite: they conceal the faults of their neighbours:

He knows and keeps riding on silently: he smiles in thy face in order to mask (his feelings).<sup>47</sup>

... He knows and by command of Almighty he conceals (it), for it would not be lawful to divulge the secret of God.<sup>48</sup>

From the above passages it is easy to see how close Mawlānā's views about fault-finding are to those of Sahl Tustarī. Referring to this phrase 'neither backbite one another . . .' in same verse of the Qur'ān cited above, Tustarī enjoins: 'Whoever wants to be safe from backbiting should bar the door to ill assumptions (*zunūn*) in himself, for whoever is safe from making ill assumptions, is safe from backbiting (*ghayba*), and whoever is safe from backbiting, is safe from calumny (*zūr*), and whoever is safe from calumny, is safe from slander (*buhtān*).'<sup>49</sup> Exactly these sentiments are expressed in these famous lines by Rumi about the importance of good manners and the virtue of forbearance:

O Muslim, whilst you are still engaged in the quest, good manners are indeed nothing but forbearance with every one that is unmannerly.

When you see any one complaining of such and such a person's ill nature and bad temper,

Know that the complainant is bad-tempered, forasmuch as he speaks ill of that bad-tempered person,

Because he alone is good-tempered who is quietly forbearing towards the bad-tempered and ill-natured.<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although Mawlānā had recourse to diverse textual and contextual methods of exegesis of the Qur'ān in order to expound his own viewpoint and ideas, it is quite evident that he propounded his own particular esoteric approach to various verses of the scripture

47 Ibid., Book I: 330. 48 Ibid., Book III: 1669.

49 Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Keeler and Keeler, p. 202. See also Sulamī, *Jawāmi'*, ed. Kohlberg, vol. 2, p. 263.

50 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. Nicholson, Book IV: 771–74.

throughout the *Mathnawī*. However, his aim was neither aesthetic elaboration nor literary elucidation of individual verses, nor was he interested in highlighting the contextual historical meanings of any its verses. Rather, his focus was on the esoteric significance of the Muslim missal, wherein he sought to reveal the secondary, hidden connotations *par derrière de la lettre* of the text in order to disclose the spiritual and moral meanings that lay secreted therein.

The fundamental aim of Rumi's mystical thought in the *Mathnawī* is one of moral prescription, his objective being to cure the afflictions of the soul and find remedies for psycho-spiritual diseases. His poetry in this sense is homiletic, aiming to better comprehend and hence expound and remedy the maladies of the lower soul and the foibles of egocentric self-absorption that accompanied them. It is largely to this end that he has recourse to citation of passages from the Muslim scripture. Since his esoteric approach to the Qur'ān was a matter of practical ethics and not abstract theoretical hermeneutics, he also easily managed to elaborate his own independent, mythopoetic vision of the world and man, and to develop his own unique theocentric humanistic thinking that has made his thought and verse admired by votaries of all faiths and sects the world over.

To some extent, we find echoes of Mawlānā's hermeneutical approach in the grand commentaries on the Qur'ān by Sahl Tustarī and Sulamī written in the ninth century. During the twelfth century, the works of these classical exegetes were later reclaimed and developed to their full maturity in the Sufi poetry of Sanā'ī and in the mystical theology of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, whose esoteric mode of thinking continued to dominate the mainstream of Persian Sufi mystical literature thereafter. Finally, drawing on these rich veins of mystical exegesis developed over the previous four centuries, in the thirteenth century Rumi turned his own *Mathnawī* into an independent, esoteric commentary on the Qur'ān, declaring it in fact to be a veritable 'Decoder of the Qur'ān'. How and why this is so, we hope to have partially shown above.

In the second, concluding part of this essay, forthcoming in the *Mawlana Rumi Review*, vol. VII, we continue to explore how Rumi addresses another wide range of Sufi themes – tribulations and trials, divine deceit or God's guile, the importance of trustworthiness in concealing secrets, the doctrine of trust in God and renunciation of personal contrivance and volition, the necessity of maintaining a

positive and good opinion of the ways of God, the doctrine of the abandonment of secondary causes, and finally, the role and meaning of supplication and invocation in the spiritual life – showing how many of his expressions in the *Mathnawī* about these topics have their source in the commentaries on the Qur'ān by Sahl Tustarī, Sulamī, and other early classical commentators.

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