Commentary on a Verse of Rumi

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Juan Cole

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Commentary on a Verse of Rumi was written by Bahá'u'lláh for the Bahá'í courier, Salman.[1] The verse in question comes from the Mathnavi (Couplets) of the medieval mystic Mawlana Jalalu'd-Din Rumi (1207-1273), who lived and wrote for most of his life in Konya, in what is now Turkey. The main thrust of the tablet is to discuss issues in the debate over the unity of being (wahdat al-wujud) in Sufi thought. Internal evidence suggests that this tablet may be dated to the late Edirne period, sometime after the most great separation between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal in September 1867. It mentions Azal's attempt to have Bahá'u'lláh killed by the barber Muhammad-`Ali Salmani, and it also mentions Azali complaints that they were not receiving their fair share of the stipend the Ottoman government was giving the exiles. I would like to address two issues here. The first is how Bahá'u'lláh describes Rumi's position on this debate, and to what extent his comments accord with contemporary scholarship on the issue. The second is the salience of the issue of the unity of being for very early Bahá'í-Azali polemic. At first glance, this metaphysical concern seems unrelated to the struggle with the Azalis. But is it really a non-sequitur?

The first question Bahá'u'lláh discusses is how it can be that Bahá'u'lláh, the true promised one, has not been immediately recognized by all, and that Azali Babis, false claimants, remain influential. Bahá'u'lláh offers a kabbalistic explanation. In the previous dispensation of Islam, the witness to faith stated that "No God is there but He" (la ilaha illa huwa). The first word, "la" or "no," is negative, and it precedes the positive affirmation of God's peerlessness. Thus, in the Islamic dispensation and its wake, the "letters of negation" have triumphed over the "letters of affirmation" in the outward world. But although in the exoteric domain things are contrary to the will of the Manifestations of God, esoterically everything is occurring according to the divine will. In the Bahá'í dispensation, however, God has removed the negative particle from before the affirmation. That is, Bahá'ís say "He is God," rather than "No God is there but He." This switch from precedence for the negative to precedence for the positive is apparently an omen for a brighter future in the new dispensation, and presumably a closer accord between the exoteric and esoteric worlds. The context here is the continuing negative influence of the Islamic "No!" on the Babi-Bahá'ís situation, such that Bahá'u'lláh is afflicted by tribulations, and says, "a person [Azal] whom we raised over months and years with the hand of compassion once attempted to kill me."

Another problem Bahá'u'lláh addresses, in response to Salman's inquiry, is how someone can go from being good to being evil, and how, it seems implied, Bahá'u'lláh could not have known that Azal would betray him. Bahá'u'lláh replies that God always judges persons according to their outward appearance at any one time, and has commanded prophets and messengers to do likewise. If an individual is at this moment a believer and monotheist, then the effulgence (tajalli) of divine unity is refulgent within him. While he is in this station, no one must oppose him. After he rises in opposition, however, the effulgence that had been the basis for describing him, and all the other related attributes, depart from him. Now that individual is not the same person, since he does not possess the same attributes; even his clothes are different. He might ordinarily wear cotton; while he was good, the cotton might in God's eyes appear to be silk, whereas when he turns evil, it is the flaming tar of hellfire. Bahá'u'lláh makes an analogy to the lamp. When it is lit, it would be a lie to deny its radiance, whereas when the flame is snuffed out by a gale, it would be a lie to say it gives light. The insightful mystic will realize then, that souls are like mirrors and divine attributes are like the sun's rays shining in them. A person's attributes are not intrinsic to the individual, but rather pertain to the effulgence of God that has become manifest in the mirrors. Once the rays are withdrawn, it would be a falsehood to praise the individual.

Now Bahá'u'lláh turns to an explication of the verse of Rumi:

Because the colorless has fallen captive to color, Moses has gone to war with Moses.

Bahá'u'lláh explains that the mystics suppose that God is like the sea and the creation is like the waves, or that God is like the ink and all things are as the letters. They term the first the station of oneness and the second the station of multiplicity. He quotes "one mystical philosopher" as having said, "The realities of things exist in God's essence in a most noble manner, and then he emanates them forth." The point is that whoever bestows a thing cannot be said to lose it, and this emanation does not create a sharp break between creator and created. Bahá'u'lláh continues,

Ibn `Arabi has written a lengthy commentary on this subject. Mystical philosophers and their modern successors, such as Mulla Sadra Shirazi, Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani, and others, have walked the road that Ibn `Arabi paved. But blessed are they who tread upon the crimson knoll on the shore of this ocean, which revive by one of its waves all forms and shades in a manner not imagined by the people.

The mystics, he explains, considered Moses and Pharaoh both to be manifestations of God. They held the former to be the manifestation of God's name, the Guide, while they said the latter was a manifestation of God's name, the Misleading. The two were thus ordained to battle it out. After shedding their human forms, they believed, both Moses and Pharaoh were one, since originally all things are one. (Thus, they interpret Rumi's verse, "Moses went to war with Moses" as meaning that Moses went to war with a Pharaoh who was identical to him.) The mystics tell the story that Moses worked on himself for a month. During the first ten days, he annihilated his own deeds in the deeds of God. In the next ten, he annihilated his attributes in God's attributes. In the final ten, he annihilated his own essence in God's essence. His attempt to do the last, however, was not quite perfect, and a remnant of being remained within him, which is why God said to him on Mount Sinai, "You shall never see me."

Bahá'u'lláh is not interested in entering into the debate over the unity of being (wahdat al-wujud) that had raged ever since posterity had given that name to the doctrines of Ibn al-`Arabi and his successors (some of which Bahá'u'lláh has just summarized). Indeed, even Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i wrote a long refutation of the equivalence of Moses and Pharaoh. Bahá'u'lláh, to the contrary, says, "Today, those who affirm and those who deny these utterances are on the same level." This is because the epistemological stations on which these debates make sense are those of absence on the plane of creation, whereas Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime was the era of Presence and fullness. That is, during his lifetime, Moses' request on Sinai, "Show me yourself," could be answered in the affirmative, since God was manifest in Bahá'u'lláh. This is the point where Bahá'u'lláh makes his famous statement that however high exalted souls soar into the heaven of mystical insight, they can never escape the plane of contingent being or go beyond what was created in their own souls by their own souls. The closest they can come to knowing God is to know the Manifestations.

He says that it was not Rumi's intention in the Mathnavi to say that Moses and Pharaoh were one in essence. For Pharaoh and his like were created by a word from Moses. The world of spirits is monochrome, all the same color, and therein no conflict or struggle can take place, for the underlying causes of conflict are not visible. After spirits enter bodies and they appear in this world, the causes of conflict come into being and differentiation occurs. Bahá'u'lláh gives the example of the divine name, the Self-Sufficient. In the monochrome divine realm, it is unified. And also in the human world, before any divine attributes are acquired, human beings are undifferentiated; for instance, one can hardly tell if the abject poor are generous or miserly, until they acquire an attribute like Self-Sufficiency. But when this divine name is radiated into the mirrors of human existence, the effects of that effulgence differ with each soul. In the generous, it appears as generosity, but in the miserly it takes the form of avarice. On becoming self-sufficient, one person might gather war materiel to launch a battle against the truth (as Azal had done), while another might safeguard others by giving away all his wealth. All these diverse effects are produced by a single ray from the divine name, the Self-Sufficient.

Bahá'u'lláh says that the blessed are those who do not remain prisoners of the polychrome or multi-colored world, but who rather attain to the hue of God and have taken on the color of the Absolute Truth. Only those who are detached and therefore are among the people of Baha have knowledge of this color. The word of revelation is one, but when some encounter it, they become tinted with God and are adherents, while others who encounter it take on the hue of Satan and become opponents. The color of the All-Merciful purifies souls of any other hue, whereas those tinted with the devil are sullied with the manifold colors of self and passion. Rumi was not saying that Moses and Pharaoh were equivalent, but rather that Moses sought to deliver Pharaoh from the colors of annihilation and to allow him to be tinted with the hue of God. The cause of the war between Moses and Pharaoh was color. Bahá'u'lláh points out that a thorough comparative study of the figure of Pharaoh in Rumi's Mathnavi would decisively prove that he did not think Pharaoh equivalent to Moses. He cites Rumi's verse, "If he is without the grace of God and his chosen ones, his page is black though he be an angel," to show that Rumi did differentiate between the good and the evil.

Let me come back to the questions I raised in the beginning. First, a very important recent chapter by William Chittick, the foremost living authority of Ibn al-`Arabi and also an authority on Rumi, has brought sharply into question the older view, common among both Orientalists and Muslim scholars, that Rumi was influenced by Ibn al-`Arabi and his school. Chittick argues that "Ibn al-`Arabi and Rumi represent `two forms of spirituality' which, as forms, are different." Rumi, he says, could be said to accept the `unity of being' only in a very vague and general sense, as an affirmation of God's unity and that nothing really exists but him. He points out that Ibn al-`Arabi represented a Western, Arab tradition of theosophical Sufism, whereas Rumi stood in the Eastern, Persian line of Ansari, Sana'i, and Ahmad al-Ghazali, which stressed love and an audacious approach to Islamic teachings.[2] It therefore seems likely that Bahá'u'lláh is correct, and the theosophical unity-of-being approach to understanding Rumi's verse about Moses battling Moses is anachronistic and misplaced. On the other hand, it is important to note that Bahá'u'lláh does not denounce the theosophical approach to the unity of being and, in fact, condemns all polemics over this issue as missing the point.

Second, why, at this juncture in the history of the Bahá'í faith, did the issue of the unity of being and mystical perception come to the fore? I would argue that the metaphysical issues dealt with in this tablet probably can be related to the beginnings of Bahá'í-Azali polemics. I suspect that one of the arguments made by the Azalis was that Azal could not have been holy before 1866 and suddenly demoted to demonic in that year. That is, the divine attributes they held to exist in Azal could not be suddenly dislodged, any more than God could suddenly divest himself of the subsisting realities that he had emanated forth. We know that a similar debate existed on immutability, and that Azalis denied that the transubstantiation of base metal into gold was possible, whereas Bahá'u'lláh affirmed it. In both instances, a metaphysics and even physics of change is upheld by Bahá'ís and a more static conception of both this world and the next is advocated by the Azalis. The Sufi doctrine of the unity of being could also be used to justify refusing to take sides between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal, on the grounds that ultimately both of them were immutable manifestations of divine names.

I believe this polemical concern was behind the question Salman posed to Bahá'u'lláh as to the meaning of a verse by Rumi that had been interpreted pantheistically by some commentators. Bahá'u'lláh's answer falls in the Eastern Persian tradition within Sufism, of a stress on love rather than on theosophy, and it might be termed Ghazalian, after the orthodox Sunni mystic al-Ghazali. Rather than collapsing the metaphysical realms of divinity and creation, he makes a distinction between the monochrome realm of God, where differentiation is impossible, and the polychrome world of creation, where the loud colors of self and passion are at war with the one hue of the divine. In so doing, he, no less than Goethe or Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, presents us with a Farbentheologie or Theology of Color. The conclusion is that conflict is real in this world. Mystical insight is interpreted as insight into the prophets and Manifestations of God, just as orthodox Sufism focused on the Reality of Muhammad as a kind of Logos symbol, and the believer's relationship to them is one of passionate love, in accord with Rumi and his tradition. The resulting metaphysics of change, distinction and passion helps make sense of a world in which the Vicar of the Bab could rise in opposition against the messianic figure, He Whom God Will Make Manifest, something most Babis would have thought impossible before 1865 or 1866. "Because the colorless has fallen captive to color, Moses has gone to war with Moses."

The original text of Commentary on a Verse of Rumi is found in Sabri, ed, Majmu`ih-yi Matbu`ih (Wilmette, 1978) pp 128-160.

William C. Chittick, "Rumi and Wahdat al-Wujud," in Amin Banani, et al, eds, Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 70-111.

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