



# **SPIRITUAL ANTHROPOLOGY: MAN AND HIS SPIRITUAL POSITION IN RUMI'S DOCTRINE**

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## **Abstract**

Fritjof Schuon (2002) in one of his works suggested the need for a 'spiritual anthropology' to re-identify the meaning of man<sup>1</sup>. In modern anthropology man is simply a creature that exists in the natural world with the tendency to survive and to improve his self in accordance with the changing conditions of his natural and social environment. In different branches of modern knowledge, such as anthropology, sociology and psychology the image of man is no more than a natural creature that creates his living conditions by adaptation and improvement as allowed by the natural and social conditions surrounding him. It is in the works of Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi and Sufist in general, as well as other metaphysicians of the Oriental traditions, that one can find the abundant discussions on the concept of man, his reality, both spiritual and bodily as well as his potential force that is inherent within him to transcend his limited elemental or bodily self and able to realize his inner self that portrays him as he really was in the very beginning. This paper will discuss the above need to understand the meaning of man by using the arguments of the great thinker, Mawlana Rumi in his works especially the *Divan Shams al-Tabriz*, and relates his concepts to re-identify the meaning and the inner dimension of man in religious teachings.

**Key words** : Rumi, Sufist, Man, Reality

## 1. Introduction

The modern approach to the knowledge and reality of man is grossly limited and requires this re-identification of human nature as an alternative to the present day knowledge of man and the way how he is defined. This is direly needed especially by the Eastern or Oriental students of modern social sciences and the humanities who may have been influenced by the modern concept of man and as the result have forgotten their own doctrines of man as contained in their own traditions.

Frithjof Schuon can be considered the representative metaphysician of the Traditional school of thought; together with Rene Guenon as the founder of this school of thought and a large number of scholars including Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Huston Smith, Ananda Coomaraswamy and many others as the followers of this school which is also known as the Perennial school of thought that propagates Perennial Philosophy. Rene Guenon since 1920's had begun to criticize the modern West in its approach to knowledge which he considered one sided, completely secular in nature and is based on false principles in formulating what is known by them as knowledge. Since then Guenon was critically attacked and largely ridiculed by the modern scholars as unscientific and ignorant of the modern scientific and humanistic approach to knowledge and reality. However, a deeper understanding and sound arguments may suggest that the doctrine on the nature of man is not understandable if modern arguments are taken into consideration since they are limited and contain no more than the mere rational and sociological suggestions.<sup>2</sup>

Rumi even though a poet, is also a philosopher and a theologian at the same time. Any analysis of Rumi's work requires a deep understanding in Islamic theology, philosophy, mysticism and *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet of Islam), Quranic understandings and Islamic history too. Without the deep interest and knowledge in those fields Rumi would always be misunderstood. The beauty of his literary expression is doubtlessly of the highest quality; short, direct to the question discussed and short precise answers by using simple daily examples and imageries of the various flora and fauna of the daily life to explain deep theological questions and problems. With 60,000 stanzas

written or sung by Rumi, he is indeed the greatest poet-thinker of all time or known in the Western as well as Eastern literary histories. Rumi presently is the most well celebrated Eastern poet in the West surpassing others like Saadi, Ibn ‘Arabi and Omar Khayyam. Recently no less than ten works on Rumi were published in Europe and the United States and Rumi continuously receives recognition the world over.

## 2. Man

The doctrine of man in Rumi’s works is not different than what the Sufis have been saying throughout history but Rumi has got the capability to express his ideas on man in the most beautiful, clear and precise expressions. Man is the Divine manifestation and not the manifestation of his own mind, behavior and acts. These elements of human realities, i.e. the mind, psyche and bodily acts are finally the expressions and manifestation of the Divine. Rumi says: “If He made me a goblet, I become a goblet and if He made me a scimitar I become a scimitar, if He made me a fountain I spring out water, if He made me fire I produce heat, if He made me rain, I yield harvest, if He made me an arrow I pierce through, if He made me a serpent, I spew poison and if He made me a friend, I serve”. He also said “We have honored the children of Adam to mean he is the astrolabe of God. When God causes man to have knowledge of Him and to know Him and to be familiar with Him through the astrolabe of his own being he beholds moment by moment and flash by flash the manifestation of God and His infinite beauty and that beauty is never absent in human hearts and his presence. In such a case, ‘I am as what He made of me as my will is His, my power is His, my existence is His (belonging to Him) and my act is His’. In other words ‘I’ in actuality ‘am’ nothing but His expressions. (Schimmel 1980:246)

Man does not originate from earth alone neither is he completely an angel. In many ways he is angelic yet he is man externally, bodily and created by nature, that is to say his bodily or lowly nature. “We have been in heaven, we have been the companions of the angels. Let us go again there, master, for that is our city” said Rumi. (Schimmel 1980:247)<sup>3</sup> Man originated from the higher plane not of the earth entirely for spiritually he is of the

spirit given to or blew into the bodily clay. Rumi had also said, "the angel was saved by knowledge, but by ignorance, the son of man remains in between"<sup>4</sup>.

As man he is burdened with the responsibility of shouldering the meaning of creation and experiences the reality of creation. He is the final creation who is made to know, to choose as well as to bear witness of the Divine reality in His creative process of existence. "I took the trust which heaven did not accept... but with the firm belief that Thy kindness would support me", says Rumi. (Schimmel 1980:247). This kindness, the Divine assistance would allow man to share the burden of shouldering the Divine command on him and to recognize His transcendental reality of His Oneness.

According to Rumi, man was taught the reality of all things even before his creation on earth. His spirit was taught the names of all things. Rumi alludes to the reality of those names not as they are identified externally. Moses was given a staff and was known to everyone a staff yet its reality is beyond a staff for it breaks the sea into two. Man was taught the reality of things beyond their earthly reality. When man was sent to the earth he forgets the reality of the real and only perceives the real. 'Alif', 'Lam', 'Mim' have their realities but the meanings of the three make them more meaningful than the forms of their scripts. 'Omar,' said Rumi, was known as a tyrant yet the true Omar has been made a faithful in heaven. The acts of Khidr were known to be wrong externally yet the reality of his act has been made true in the ultimate sense, since he had the knowledge of the ultimate reality of things as was described in the *Qur'an*.

For Zulaikha, said Rumi, everything in existence has one reality only that is Joseph. She sees Joseph in everything she saw and her mind and consciousness is engulfed in Joseph only. So is the case with the one who is engrossed in God. There is no reality to him except God.

Man has a special privilege among creation for he has made and supposed to fulfill the oath that he has made before God ever since the pre-eternity. The verse on *Alastu* in the *Qur'an* and later the doctrine of *alastu* as being known by many Muslim thinkers is said to have been professed by man since the very beginning of his creation, and this was discussed doctrinally since the time of

Junayd al-Baghdadi but it is Rumi who made full use of this doctrine in his works. This doctrine occupies many pages of the Mawlana's poems and was scattered in many places. Rumi said "He, who has seen the happiness of the pre-eternity has no fear of the eternal" The human reality that has been endowed to him, that is the complete understanding of his self since pre-eternity was said to have been actualized in the bond made between God and man. Man would always and forever remember the covenant made between him and his Lord when the Lord says "Am I not your Lord?" and to this they answered "We do testify" For Rumi this testimony is eternal, everlasting from the beginning to the end of creation. "The wave of *alast* came, the boat of the outward forms broken, when the boat is broken that is the time of union and meeting', says Rumi<sup>5</sup>.

If man is always conditioned by God why is he divided into two possible conditions in his life experience; good and evil, intelligence and ignorance and following either the right or the wrong destiny in life. These have to do with 'the risk of creation' wherein man has to undergo a process of cleansing from the below or evil world to the above or the good state. Cunning, intelligence is from *Iblis* and love from Adam, said Rumi. Adam is made on the foundation of love and sincerity and originally endowed with natural inclination of complete surrender while wickedness, cunningness, trickery are from *Iblis* who questioned the Divine Wisdom of creating Adam. While in his worldly life, Man is conditioned to be in a state by which he ran the possibility of derailing from his very own original nature by being en-captured in the trap which has been set up by *Iblis* and *Satan* who whisper uncertainty and disbelief in the heart of man. This possibility has been allowed by God due to the appeal made by *Iblis* after he was disowned by God for his failure to bow down before Adam.

### 3. Body and Soul

While discussing the inner conflicts between good and evil or certainty and uncertainty, Rumi also describes the differences between the body and the soul or the spirit. Following the method of describing the external and the internal by earlier theologians and philosophers, Rumi differentiates between the two- body and

spirit. The outward body and the four elements that originate in the body are like a tent for the spirit within. This tent is where the 'inner meaning' lives and is protected to its full beauty like a Turkish prince. The body is like a husk and those who care for the body is like a child who loves the external husk without realizing the content which may be an almond or a nut. The husk is changing and only useful to protect the kernel. Those who love the husk are always being burned by the Beloved for love is at the center or the heart of everything meaningful. If the external is real said Rumi than there would be no difference between the Prophet of Islam and Abu Jahal( Prophets uncle who died an unbeliever and was the main opponent of the Prophet) because both were Arabs and of the same clan.

The value of the body is not the body itself but determines it through the inner forces which are conflicting between the one and the other. The eye of the head, said Rumi, or the sense of sight is in conflict with the eye of the heart. A tree that grows with the water of life lives on and may continue to grow but the one watered with the water that contains poison may die. The body needs to be watered with the water of the heart not of the senses. Rumi equates the body with darkness while the soul with light and both are in the state of a constant conflict at every moment.

According to Rumi the bodily life will come to an end which would finally free the spirit inside. The body is temporary and limited for the sake of the inner reality, and it should not be cultivated with too much care. "If He breaks this cup of mine, I do not drink grief. I have another cup from this cupbearer under my arm. The cup is purely dust made body, the soul is pure wine; He grants me another cup if this cup is infirm"<sup>6</sup>.

In order to explain the limitation of the external or the carnal soul Mawlana made use of many sayings of the Prophet such as 'Die before you die' and '...that you have returned from a small holy war and enter into a big holy war...the war against your carnal desire' and many other examples<sup>7</sup>.

#### **4. Spirit and Body**

We have earlier mentioned that man is made of two different entities; the internally spiritual and the externally body. The

spiritual self is always at the command of God. The Qur'an in one of the verses said that they (the Jews) asked you of the spirit. Say to them that the spirit is at the command of God. Since God is All Powerful, All Knowing and All Comprehensive, man has to be consistently obeying Him at every moment even though he, out of ignorance, may consider himself as rebelling against his Lord, yet he is actually powerless to do so. He fails to recognize between the apparently and the ultimately Real. In this sense, man is at every moment under the Divine Powerful Command and man cannot disobey whether he realizes it or otherwise. The sinful soul contemplates the external self and proclaimed that every action or move as belonging to his own. This is the condition of man who is veiled from recognizing the Divine reality and upholds his own self reality.

To realize his spiritual condition man must return to his original self since he who knows his self knows his Lord as has been said in one of the sayings of the Prophet. When he has fully realized his spiritual self, man may be able to comprehend the true nature of the self; one is apparent and the other is real. Maulana Rumi once said that he is a crooked letter, it is that God's reading of this letter will make him straight. The world and the external self is always crooked, limited, relative and in the state of constant hastiness, pain and rebellious while the spirit is obeying, surrenders and rests in peace. We can also say that the spirit is always free while the body is imprisoned. The body is imprisoned due to the soul or the carnal desire that demands self-recognition, self-establishment, wealth accumulation and everlasting existence.

While the external self prefers his self to be the owner of the world and qualifies his self with all the possible 'the' that is all under the '*al...*' (the) of everything the inner self prefers to deny everything of this world with the utterance of 'no', that is the '*la..*' of everything. The one who surrenders his external self to his internal self begins with the saying of '*la illaha..*'. Hakim Sana'i said, that No or '*la*' is the broom that sweeps the room of the heart. And Mawlana Rumi said, "Who knows God (*ilah*)? Someone who is saved from all the '*la*' is he who has chosen to move away from the '*la*'. This man is the lover who has experienced affliction (*bala*)"(Schimmel 1980:250)



Mawlana explains the return to the spiritual state begins with the testimony that there is no god but God and the denying of the self from being the 'the' of everything. Only those who have denied his external self will be able to recognize God in everything and do not commit polytheism or *shirk*, the greatest sin by man in Islam. Purification through complete acceptance (*taslim*) and true belief (*iman*) have been prescribed in religion in the pillars of religion and the pillars of true belief. However for the Sufis these should be properly internalized in the acts that represent complete surrender and complete belief without a single doubt.

Many among the Sufis consider these conditions can only be achieved by those who travel on the spiritual path. Those who choose the way of the spirit have left the world behind and see God leading them to maturity. Rumi says "Grief cleans the house of the heart and shakes off the yellow leaves from the branch of the heart, so that new green leaves can sprout and it digs out old crooked roots to make room for a new one."<sup>8</sup> Once men achieves maturity they see things as things really are in every moment of their lives. The Sufis consider affliction as trials and tribulations which would allow them to see the world as passive, fleeting and opaque and always in the state of surrendering completely to the command of the Divine. This condition is not passivity on the part of man himself but the passivity of his external self. Internally he is more active than before and manages to achieve objectivity through his vision. The eyes become sharper and the intellect becomes sharpened. This condition is not as has been ascribed to Sufis by the theologians and philosophers and modern thinkers who misunderstood the whole issue in hand.

The Sufis prefer to be in the state of servitude rather than self-proclamation. Destitution and needs allow them to be in their place as humans and servants while complete external confidence in self- administration will cause ruin to the soul. Mawlana said, "Whenever there is a rain, there is hope for a treasure: Why do you not seek the treasure of God in the devastated heart?" In other words a devastated heart surrenders to God and as the result the hidden treasure can be identified. Of course the famous hadith that God is a hidden treasure and wishes to be known is related with the Mawlana's saying that in the ruined heart the treasure can be found. To surrender or to be empty of the lower self is the prerequisite for

the new awakening; to realize that the true self is achieved by surrendering the false self, the ego or the shadow that man thought as his true self out of his ignorance to the true self, his original self in the presence of God when his spirit was created. It is in the latter that he may find the true meaning of his self- reality.

## 5. Conclusion

Modern disciplines of the so-called knowledge are inadequate to be able to explore the meaning of man. Religious rites and rituals require adequate tools to interpret the inner nature of their expressions. The meaning of man cannot be subjected to modern interpretations alone without further exploration in the sacred doctrines of the past that formulated those doctrines in the first place. Spiritual anthropology is the way to answer many questions that have not been addressed in the modern approaches to understand the nature and significance of man which may remain a mystery to any otherwise serious explorer of this concept.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Frithjof Schuon is among the earliest to discuss on the meaning of man from the religious and spiritual point of view. Even though Schuon had made use of the various doctrines that can be found in Hindu, Islamic and other traditions, it is interesting to understand his arguments in the light of the present need to redefine major concepts according to the original used of these concepts in religious traditions that originate the discussions on God and man before modern Anthropology, Psychology and sociology try to reformulate these concepts in the limited understanding according to the external and data based understanding of them. For the concept of man see Schuon (2002: 281- 290).

<sup>3</sup> Various religious expressions cannot be measured by modern anthropological tools nor can be based on data-survey alone which may be misleading. Scholars like Taylor, Strauss, Brown even Durkheim have misunderstood religious expressions and practices because their interpretations are of the modern and semi scientific nature and have been in many ways biased to their own limitations and understandings of many religious expression A proper study is needed to answer many misunderstandings of the anthropologist and sociologist's ideas that have caused many errors in the intellectual interpretation of religious concepts and practices .

<sup>3</sup> This idea of trading that is between the real and the unreal. Man trades his external self for his internal self since his real trading that will be able to bring him profit is 'there' not 'here'; our city is over there, This spiritual trading that is that will give spiritual profit. The Qur'an speaks of those who are willing to give God a loan that God may increase the profit (spiritual attainment) to many folds in return. This alludes to the gift of the spirit for the sake of the sacrifice made by man.

<sup>4</sup> Man, the middle creation is neither an angel nor an animal. Animals are saved by their ignorance while angels by their knowledge. Man can be lower than animals due to the possibility of knowledge that he has not able to utilize or higher than angels due to the fact that despite knowledge is a possibility, he manage to gain it. He is the free choice that he makes out of his potentiality. This is the burden that he carries while other creations refused to commit, as was mentioned in the Qur'an. (Schimmel 1980:257)

<sup>5</sup> Rumi may be among the earliest who had utilized the doctrine of *alastu* in his works. Junayd al-Baghdadi had also emphasized on this. Man is made to know his reality even before he was born or him in the state of pre-eternity. He has recognizes God and repeats it again in acceptance to be a Muslim by uttering the two sentences of confession that God is truly God and Muhammad is His messenger. For this reason Rumi said that those who have seen the pre-eternity had no fear of the eternity. (Schimmel 1980, page 250 and other immediate following pages).

<sup>6</sup> The soul is the source of the body. Man ends his life in this world to be awakened in another life after this life. What give life is the soul and the spirit that commands the soul not the body. If I die here I will lives on in another reality. Why should man be sad of his destiny in this world?

<sup>7</sup> The *hadith* of the Prophet "Die before you die". Die in *mawt al-ikhtiyari* before the bodily or natural death that is *mawt al-tabii*; to die from the carnal soul before one died.

<sup>8</sup> Self exploration through the method of self-purification which is known and established in the metaphysical practices of the East before the external understanding of the human phenomena were invented by the modern secular Western approach to knowledge.

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