

Love Beyond Belief

Opening the Eye of the Heart
in the Mirror of Religious Truth

Alan Williams
University of Manchester

Chisholme Institute June 19, 2016

I would like to dedicate this lecture to Rokus de Groot, who worked so hard with me to make this course a success here at the Chisholme Institute, and to thank him I would like to play one of my most favourite songs of Henry Purcell. *Early, O Lord, my fainting soul* (1680) by Henry Purcell, words by John Patrick, paraphrase of Psalm 63, for two trebles, tenor and bass

Early, O Lord, my fainting soul
Thy mercy does implore
No traveller in distant lands
Can thirst for water more.
I long to appear as I was wont,
within thy holy place,
Thy pow'r and glory to behold,
And to partake thy grace.
For life itself, without thy love,
No relish can afford;
No other joys can equal this,
To serve and praise the Lord.
I therefore make my pray'rs to thee,
And bless thee whilst I live;
This, like the choicest dainties, will
Both food and pleasure give.
When others sleep, my wakeful thoughts
Present thee to my mind;
And in the night I think how good
My God has been, and kind.
Since thou alone hast been my help,
To thee alone I fly;
And on thy watchful providence
With cheerfulness rely.
Dangers, whilst thou art near to me,
Do threaten me in vain;
When I keep close to God his care
And pow'r will me sustain.

The subject I have chosen is 'Love Beyond Belief: Opening the Eye of the Heart in the Mirror of Religious Truth'. In recent years the strife between Jew, Christian and Muslim has become daily headline news of violence, terror, outrage, strife, and bloodshed tantamount to a war going on. Yet these three religions are often grouped together as sharing a common source of revelation, and are referred to as 'Abrahamic religions'. Is there any chance that harmony and commonality can be found in the supposed common source. The name 'Abrahamic' divides as much as it unites Jews, Christians and Muslims. Jews regard Abraham as 'Our Father Abraham', and the founding patriarch of the Children of Israel, who made the everlasting covenant with God. Christians Christianize this idea of the covenant, as being a covenant of faith in Jesus Christ. Muslims claim Ibrahim was one of the first Muslims, and like the Jews call him 'Our Father Ibrahim'. These three claims hardly unite the Abrahamic faiths, but this division is only a small part of the story.

To what extent did the spiritual masters of the medieval period, in particular the Persian poet and mystic Rumi, believe in the unity of the religions? What guidance or inspiration on the question of the friction between Jews, Christians and Muslims, if any, can we find in Rumi's work? 750 years ago the Abbasid Caliphate was brought to a sudden end by the Mongol conquerors of Baghdad. Christians were engaged for several centuries in slaughtering Muslims and Jews in quest of possession of their scriptural epicentre, the city of Jerusalem, , since from the middle of the 4th century to the Islamic conquest in the middle of the 7th century, the Roman province of Palestine had been a Christian nation with Jerusalem its principal city.



Rumi, Ibn 'Arabi and other great masters of Jewish and Christian mystical traditions, *appear to reconcile* the outward differences between the faiths and speak of the unifying and creative power of love that lies within human nature. The word 'Beshara' itself expresses a principle that might unite the faiths. The birth of the potency of transformative love in the form of

Jesus was announced in the Gospel of Luke 2:10 εὐαγγελίζομαι ὑμῖν χαρὰν μεγάλην ‘I bring you tidings of great joy’, Or as Quran 3:45 tells it, about the Masih, Isa Ibn Maryam,

idh qālati 'l-malaikatu “yā maryamu, innallāha yubashiruki bi kalimatīn minhu, smuhu al-masiḥu, ‘isā ibnu maryama, wajihan fi’l-dunya, wa’l-akhirati wa min al-muqarrabin

When the angels said, 'Mary, God gives thee good tidings of a Word from Him (), whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary; high honoured shall he be in this world and the next, one of those brought close (to God).

The Luke passage of the annunciation is translated into Arabic by the same verb that is used namely *bashara*. In the subtle and poetic teachings of both Christian and Sufi Muslim mystics the birth of divine love in the human heart is magnified and celebrated as something to be known and realised among all humankind.

But in this lecture, I want to grasp something of a nettle that is often avoided in discussion of this subject. I think that there is an issue that comes between Christians, Muslims and Jews that need not divide them, but it is one Christians have insisted on for many centuries as being definitive of their theology and belief. I sent an article to the Guardian last week (04 June) which they declined to publish as not being part of their current agenda, but I will share it with you:

Muslims often protest that Islam is really a *peaceful* faith. This message is drowned out by explosions of terror perpetrated by extremists, but also by the din of Wahhabist and Salafist preaching. Such preachers insist on a legalistic and puritanical interpretation of Islam that comes across as hostile and religiously exclusivist. The antidote to this is to be found within Islam itself – a form of the faith that is ancient, but which has long been opposed by the mosque-based *ulema* and legalists, namely Sufi Islam. It was from the early period a spiritual and devotional form of the faith that carried Islam to the people, assimilating to and absorbing local cultural musical and artistic traditions, along the Silk Road to China and S.E. Asia to Indonesia. One of the most central figures of this tradition is the 13th cent. Persian poet and teacher Rumi, who is better known today as the love-poet of Western celebrities such as Madonna and Philip Glass. But there is a serious and much more important side to Rumi: his greatest work, the voluminous *Masnawi*, has been known across the Muslim world as ‘the Quran in the Persian tongue’. It is a powerful, life-changing text, but Westerners, understandably perhaps, prefer the soft-focus Rumi of his short lyric poems, sanitised and filleted (by ‘translators’) of all Islamic elements.

There is another Rumi, and he may well represent a true bridge between Islam and Christianity but something unmentionable blocks this bridge. It is not political or cultural, but purely theological, and it is a barrier maintained by Christianity itself. In a word, it is the Trinitarian doctrine of Incarnation. This concept, so central to mainstream Christianity, is the great stumbling block for mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians. What many Westerners do not know is that Jesus and his mother Mary are beloved and revered figures for Muslims – Jesus is known as a prophet and the *ruh-ullah* ‘spirit of God’. Since the Council of Chalcedon in 451 Christianity adopted the dogmatic definitions of Trinitarian faith, qualifying its monotheism with the all important affirmation ‘to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly

man'. For Muslims this notion is the quintessence of idolatry and makes Christianity into a polytheistic faith – for though Muslims accept Christians as 'People of the Book' they see this Christian doctrine of incarnation as a wrong interpretation of scripture. Rumi and other Muslim mystics go to great lengths to explain how this incarnation can be understood in spiritual terms, not outward realistic terms. Indeed there is a long tradition of Christian mystics including the great German Meister Eckhart, who interpreted the incarnation in this way, as the birth of God in the human heart and soul. Christian theologians in the modern West have also struggled with theological realism – it is nearly 40 years since the *Myth of God Incarnate* debate erupted. The Sufi teachings of the presence of the spirit of God in the human heart present an invitation to Christians to re-evaluate incarnationism and remove an obstacle that has separated Christianity from Islam – not to mention Judaism – for 15 centuries.

It is this idea of the physical incarnation of God in a human being, his resurrection from the dead and the elevation of that divinised 'Son of God' to a seat at the right hand of God in heaven that causes deep unrest for Jews and Muslims: it is, as I wrote, tantamount to their definition of idolatry. How can there be something that is so central, and apparently so essential, to Christianity, that is regarded by Jews and Muslims as the quintessence of idolatry. What is it? It is certainly a departure from monotheism as it was known in Judaism, and as it continued in Islam. The origins of incarnation as a doctrine go back to the Gospel of St John 1:14 (RSV) 'and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.'

Since the definition of Christian belief was agreed on at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD the belief in the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in traditional Christianity is that the second person of the Trinity, also known as God the Son or the Logos (Word), "became flesh" by being conceived in the womb of Mary, also known as the *Theotokos* (Birth-giver to God) or "Mater Dei" (mother of God). The Incarnation belief, then, is the belief that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human.

In the past, those who denied the doctrine of Incarnation were burned at the stake as heretics (Servetus).

As I wrote, in modern times, it is now nearly 40 years since an important book of essays was published in this country, called *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The contributors to that book were all British academic theologians and Biblical scholars of the highest calibre, including the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, the late Maurice Wiles, recently departed Denis Nineham Warden of Keble Oxford, Don Cupitt of Emmanuel Cambridge, and John Hick, Professor of Theology at Birmingham University. They began by explaining that they were convinced that growing knowledge of Christian origins leads to accepting that Jesus was ... 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, *but that later Christian conceptions of him 'as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity' were a 'mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us.'* The book sold 30,000 copies in a few weeks, and caused a lot of controversy at the time, but these scholars *had* to be taken seriously, and none of them were burned at the stake. In the long run, their work has been digested in British theology and its significance has largely been explained away, or brushed under the carpet in theology courses, as a phase or type of dissident theology. The

fact that it reflected the very best of British and German theology and biblical scholarship of the previous century about the formation of early Christian doctrine, and how such a doctrine of Incarnation became dogma, the teaching of the church, can not so easily be dismissed. The doctrine of Incarnation is the central pillar of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, but it continues to be a thorn in the flesh of Christian ecumenicism, and the ability of Muslims and Jews to have a reasonable dialogue with Christians. Moreover, as I once heard a very senior scholar of Jewish thought, Professor Emile Fackenheim, put it, the incarnationist Christology of Christianity is the very backbone of centuries of anti-Semitism, for it blames the Jews for murdering their God. I remember the frisson of shock that hit the audience of Mancunian theologians and biblical scholars when he said this. He knew anti-semitism as he was arrested by the Nazis on *Kristallnacht* and sent to **Sachsenhausen** concentration camp. But since we are sitting in a church, and this is neither a sermon or lecture on Christian theology, before any of you leave I shall tell you why such things are relevant to my Beshara lecture today. In a nutshell, it is because I believe that deep down we cannot understand what Rumi is saying so long as we are caught up in the Incarnational theology of Christians. I speak from a little personal experience. I am married to a Muslim, and having been brought up a Christian in the Church of England since a child, getting my head around this theological shift on my event horizon has made me consider very seriously my own attachment to the person of Jesus Christ. For example, my musical sensibilities are steeped in Lutheran and Anglican tradition of the choral works of Bach and Purcell, who in their chorales and anthems celebrate the glory of God through the intermediary of Jesus Christ. As an example of what might be a deeper movement of the psyche, do I now need to give up my appreciation of this music. As a translator of Rumi's *Masnavi* and *ghazals*, do I need to perform radical self-surgery on my theological understanding in order to appreciate the depths of his meaning. My answer is a resounding no to both questions. Like many of you in this room, and I have to say, perhaps millions of Christians around the world I have long ago taken leave of what Don Cupitt, one of the contributors to the *Myth of God Incarnate* volume, called the 'realist' God, and hence the 'realist' Christ, of classical Christian theism. I had long ago learnt to read Rumi as always speaking through signs – metaphors and symbols – for he is as much a *poet* as a Sufi teacher.

People think of Rumi as mild-mannered and peaceable in his words. But listen to him when he gets onto the subject of Christian belief in Jesus as God. He begins by citing the Sufi whose martyrdom is celebrated as Christ-like:

When power is in the hands of traitors
Mansur Hallaj is surely on the scaffold.

So, under the Romans, Rumi implies in *Masnavi* 2.1403, the Jews slew Jesus, and he quotes a verse from the Surah 3 Al 'Imrān, 112

When idiots control important matters
it has to happen that 'they slew the prophets';

and it is then he chastises the Christians for their foolish belief:

1405 See Christian ignorance that seeks protection
from that Lord whom they hanged upon a cross
Since Christians say the Jews did crucify him,
how could one such as he afford protection?

and Rumi adds a metaphor to convey the depth of his disapproval of this Christian doctrine, which, from a Muslim point of view, is *ḥulūl* 'descent', the condescending insult to God of imagining that He could be incarnate in a body:

To pure gold and the gold-worker the danger
is greatest from the faithless counterfeiter.

Let us not think, however, that Rumi is not even-handed with regard to Jesus. Rumi simply adores Jesus. One of his most powerful stories, you will remember, is high on the agenda of his *Masnavi*, in the second story at the beginning of the first book of the *Masnavi*, the long story of the Jewish king who wanted to kill the Christians. This, as it happens, is not an anti-Jewish story, but rather one that demonstrates the continuity between true Christianity and true Islam. It begins with the age-old Muslim criticism of Judaism as not seeing the continuity between the Mosaic teaching of Judaism and Jesus teaching.

325 There was a cruel king among the Jews,
a Christian-cleansing enemy of Jesus.
It was the time of Jesus and his era,
for he was Moses' soul and Moses his.
The cross-eyed king divided up those two
of God's companions on the path of God.

This cross-eyed king does not understand that when he sees Moses and Jesus, they are in fact one and the same teacher. In Muslim tradition, Moses and Jesus are seen as prophets who encountered opposition from those to whom they ministered in their own lifetimes. As the story unfolds, we see that the Jewish king's vizier or prime minister offers to take charge of the situation and impersonate a Christian priest-teacher, who gathers many Christian disciples around him, and eventually, in his strategy of deception of the Christians, withdraws himself and issues twelve conflicting legacies, which he distributes to twelve of his pupils unbeknown to them that they are each one of twelve. Thus he sows the seeds of internecine strife, and when he himself, the vizier, commits suicide, the Christians fall into schismatic dispute about who has and what is the true legacy of the Christian teaching. They all kill one another,

And each a sword and scroll to hand, they fell
on one another like wild elephants.
A hundred thousand Christians went to slaughter
till there was heaped a hill of severed heads.
Blood rushing in a torrent left and right,
the dust thrown up by them as high as mountains.
The seeds of disagreement he had sown
turned into this calamity for them.

In a nice twist of fate, Rumi tells us that the only group of Christians who survived this internecine massacre were those who adhered to the verse in the Quran, in Surah 61 al-Şaff The Ranks, verse 6: ‘And remember when Jesus son of Mary said, ‘O children of Israel! Truly I am the Messenger of God unto you, confirming that which came before me in the Torah and bringing glad tidings of a Messenger (*mobashiran be rasulin*) to come after me whose name is Ahmad.’ (Again we have the root *bashara* in *mobashiran* ‘bringing glad tidings’)

Muhammad’s name was in the Christian Gospel
the paragon of prophets, purest ocean.
It spoke about his qualities and looks
it spoke about his wars and food and fasting.
One sect of Christians used to come upon
his name and those remarks and, for some favour,
Would offer kisses to that noble name 730
and bow their faces at that fine description.
735 In that dispute we just described, that group
were safe from dispute and from fearfulness.
Safe from the wicked vizier and his leaders
protected by Mohammed’s name, in refuge.
And their descendants multiplied as well
Mohammed’s light befriended them and helped them.
Those other groups among the Christian folk
would hold the name ‘Mohammad’ in contempt.
They were despised and ruined by the plot
of that vile-thinking vile-behaving vizier.
740 And their faith and their laws were overthrown
by those perversely-worded manuscripts.

In a brief passage in the Discourses, *Fihi Ma Fihi*, Rumi alludes to this pre-existence of the Quranic message, in the words

In *FmF* 18, ed. & tr. Willard Thackston, 86

After all, in the time of Moses and Jesus and the other prophets, the Koran existed. God’s speech existed, but it was not in Arabic. I explained this to the Koran teacher in this way, but I could see that it made no impression so I let him go.

In the same book, Rumi tells the story of a Christian teacher who encountered a number of the companions of Sadr al-Din of Konya, as follows, and you can draw from this story your own conclusions about Rumi’s attitude towards Sadr al-Din Qunavi’s opinions:¹

A Christian by the name of al-Jarrah said: “A number of Sheikh Sadr al-Din’s companions drank with me, and they said, ‘Jesus is God, as you claim. We confess that to be truth, but we conceal and deny it to preserve the honour of our community.’” Rumi said: God forbid! These are the words of those drunken with the wine of Satan, the misguider. How could it be that

¹ In *Fihi mā Fihi*, ch. 29.

Jesus, with such a frail body, who was forced to flee from the plotting Jews, place after place, who stood less than two cubits tall, should be the preserver of the seven heavens—each with a thickness of five hundred years, and from each heaven to the next a distance of five hundred years, and every earth five hundred years, and from each earth to the next five hundred years? And under this Throne, the sea of spirit whose depth is even greater, even many times the like of it? How could your reason accept that the ruler of all these is the feeblest of discourse forms? Moreover, that before being born, Jesus was the creator of the heavens and the earth? Glory be to God, above what the wrongdoers assert! The Christian said: “His body was mere dust. Dust went to dust, and pure spirit to pure spirit.” Rumi said: If the spirit of Jesus was God, where went his spirit? Spirit returns to its Origin and Creator. If he was himself the Origin and Creator, where should he go? The Christian said: “So we found it stated, and we took it as our religion.” Rumi answered: If you find and inherit your parents’ false gold, black and corrupt, do you mean you will not change it for gold of sound quality, free of alloy and adulteration? No, you keep that gold, saying, “We found it so.”

Rumi continues,

Certainly it is right to say that God honoured Jesus and drew him close, so that whoever serves Jesus has served the Lord, whoever obeys him has obeyed the Lord. But since God sends a prophet in every age, manifesting by their hand all that was manifested by Jesus’ hand and more, it behoves us to follow that prophet—not for the sake of the prophet, but for the sake of God. Only God can be served for Its own sake. Therefore, only God is truly loved. Love for all else ends in God. So, love a thing only for God, and seek a thing only for God, until in the end you come to God and love It for Itself.

I cannot think of a more powerful statement of Rumi’s clarification of the doctrine of incarnation.

As if to answer the charge that he is inventing a Jesus unrecognisable to the Christian reader of the Gospels, Rumi gives us an anecdote towards the end of the *Fihi mā Fihi* (in Discourse 68) which is strongly reminiscent of the biblical passage in which Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and to turn the other cheek.

Jesus was asked, “What is the most difficult thing in this world and the next?” He said, “The wrath of God.” They asked, “And what can save us from that?” He answered, “Master your own wrath and anger towards others.” When the mind wants to complain, do the opposite—give thanks. Exaggerate the matter to such a degree that you find within yourself a love of what repels you. Pretending thankfulness is a way of seeking the love of God.

We may compare this with Matthew 5:44:

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

or indeed Luke 6:27

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you.

To put aside the question of Jesus divinity for a moment, I have many times heard the question, ‘What is the reason for the West’s fascination for Rumi?’ Why does Coleman Barks

hit the best seller list in America. One answer is that it is his poetry, translated in a funky way, that strikes a psychological chord with us in modern times, and that Rumi was far ahead of his own time. Perhaps, but I think there is a deeper reason, and it is rather the other way around. Rumi is expressing an ancient and well-known interpretation of Christianity that we nowadays refer to as the ‘mystical tradition’, or even the ‘gnostic tradition’, in which the *meaning* of Jesus’ existence is more important than the *physical body* that Jesus took and the theological doctrine that was assembled for that idea four centuries after his death.

To go back to the idea expressed in the book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, of Jesus as a *mythos*, or profound story within our own culture that must be understood *symbolically* and not literally, we may see that even after centuries since Chalcedon and the rites of liturgical transubstantiation, not to mention all the theology that was fabricated to resist the gnostics and the mystics and the Muslims and the Jews, Rumi’s interpretation of Jesus as a *spiritual meaning* is both necessary and sufficient. To add a bodily vehicle and human dimension to God is quite unnecessary, and indeed psychologically primitive. It harks back to pagan Roman Gods, not to the Jewish Bible Jesus said he came to fulfil. However we here come up against what is possibly an unmovable barrier of Christian dogma, that will condemn such a thought, if not to *heresy* and to *burning at the stake*, then at least to the scrapheap of theological history as unthinkable. If I were to say publicly that it is nonsense to imagine the resurrected Jesus sitting at the right hand of God with the power to bestow salvation, answer prayers and ‘redeem’ all believers by his ‘precious blood’, then the rationality of that statement only be appreciated by imagining we were to make the same claim about another saintly religious virtuoso from another faith. What if, for example, what would be thought, if one were to claim that the ancient Iranian prophet Zarathushtra saved the humankind through his own precious blood, or that the ancient Indian Siddhartha Gotama Buddha, just by being himself, has already saved humanity, or that Kṛṣṇa or, yes, even the Muslim prophet Muhammad could redeem humanity *by his personal existence and his post-existential spiritual power*? Such propositions would be treated with the nonchalant disdain they would deserve in the eyes of Christians, for they would be palpable idolatrous falsehoods. However, for Christians the very same proposition is deemed to be the sacred truth par excellence, and the purest form of faith. It is explained by the Church as the mystery of the Incarnation, enshrined in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This is, by the way, something that is deeply problematic for the secular West just as it was problematic for Islam and Judaism in the past. Theology is, after all deemed to be rational discourse about the divine.

For Rumi, and for all Muslims, Jesus is a saintly and ascetic prophet who taught pure love and selflessness— his breath is miraculously healing and revivifying.

A fellow in God’s work told an ascetic,
 ‘Weep less in case your eyes come to no good!’
The ascetic said, ‘There are two possibilities:
 Eye either sees the Beautiful or not.
450 If it can see the light of God, what’s wrong,
 at one with God how small a pair of eyes are!
If it does not see God, tell it “Get out!”
 Tell such a wretched eye “Go blind!”’

Don't miss the eye, when Jesus is your own eye,
do not go wrong² – two right eyes he will give you.
The Jesus of your spirit's present with you
seek help from him, he is our pleasant help.
Don't all the time impose on Jesus heart
the slave-employment of your bone-filled body!
Don't seek the body's life from your Messiah
Don't ask from Moses what the Pharaoh wants.
Don't lay upon your heart thoughts of subsistence
Subsistence will not fail! Be there at court!
This body is intended as the spirit's tent,
or yet the example of the ark of Noah.

This is an allusion to the Christian's preoccupation with the bodily being of Jesus, and quest for bones, physical resurrection and ascension to be on the right hand of God.

Actually this theological position was widespread in the middle of the twentieth century, and led to a joke that took many forms but always went something like this:

An archaeological dig in the Holy Land unearthed the bones of Jesus Christ. The evidence was compelling, even irrefutable. After checking and double-checking his information, the head of the team of archaeologists became certain that he had found the corpse of Jesus Christ, who therefore could not have been resurrected as Christians had always believed.

Stunned, he called the only person he could think of who was the recognized head of world Christianity, the Pope. After much discussion, the Pope began to understand just how strong the evidence was, and decided that he would have to call together the leadership of all Christian denominations in order to come to terms with this astonishing discovery.

"Who," he asked his advisors, "is the greatest Protestant theologian now living?" The answer came back: "Paul Tillich." So the Pope telephoned Paul Tillich and carefully described the way the bones had been found and how convincing the archaeological evidence seemed to him.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. "Do you understand what I am saying?" asked the Pope.

"Ach," said Tillich in his thick German accent. "So there really *was* a Jesus after all!"

This joke is probably not quite as funny to you as it is to me, one who has worked through hundreds of pages of christological writings. I never found that any of my university undergraduates ever got the joke.

To turn to the crux of the matter. The doctrine of the Incarnation asserts the unique divine redemption of humankind from sin in an act of God's reaching into immanence towards mankind, where Jesus is interpreted as the new Adam, the divine dispensation of a miraculous second chance for fallen humanity after the debacle of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. Jesus Christ is the new creation of man. For Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, this is the

² lit. 'left'.

perfection of man. For Rumi, who does not use the term ‘Perfect Man’ *insane al-kami*, Jesus is indeed the perfect representation of the man of God, the *sahib-e del* ‘master of the heart’. Rumi has much to say on this subject.

I would like to read you something from a beautiful passage from the second book of the *Masnavi*, where Rūmī tells a story in just five verses, of which four are a dialogue between the mothers of two prophets as yet unborn: John the Baptist and Jesus. The Christian commentary tradition sees the story of the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth as showing John as a prophet before his birth and as a witness already pointing to Jesus. The correspondence between this story and the narrative of the Gospel of Luke I:39 ff. is best understood by citation of that text:

And Mary rose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda;
And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that,
when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was
filled with the Holy Ghost. And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou
among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the
mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded
in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there
shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord . . . And Mary
abode with her about three months and returned to her own house.³

The story of the mothers of John the Baptist and Jesus eloquently leads into his teaching that the very nature of story is a means to understanding and is not merely an end in itself—including even stories such as this about holy men and women. It is entitled

How John the Baptist, in his Mother’s Womb, Bowed to the Messiah

John Baptist’s mother secretly told Mary
before she was delivered of her burden,
‘I saw there is a king in you for certain,
a Lord of Constancy⁴ and wise apostle,⁵
Because when I came face to face with you
my baby bowed to him, illustrious Lady!
My foetus bowed in worship to your foetus—
my body was in pain from bowing so.’
And Mary said, ‘I also felt within me
this baby’s act of worship in my womb.’⁶

At this point, a complication is introduced: a sceptical agnostic who is not incredulous at the miracle of one foetus bowing to another but is armed with the historical objection that the

³ Gospel of Luke I:39–45, 56 (Authorized Version).

⁴ Those endowed with constancy and patience, who are, according to Bayḍawī, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, David, and Jesus. See Quran XLVI:34 ‘So be thou patient, as the Messengers possessed of constancy were also patient.’ See Nicholson’s comment in *Mathnawī*, Vol. VIII, 363–4.

⁵ i.e. *rasūl*, a ‘messenger’ in the Islamic sense of ‘one sent from God’, cf. the Persian *peyghambar/peyghāmbār*, which has also been adopted as a loan word in Turkish. As its etymology suggests, the term *apostolos* was applied in the Greek New Testament to one who was sent to deliver a message of salvation, but the roles of ‘apostle’ and ‘prophet’ were believed in Christian tradition to be distinct.

⁶ *Masnavi* 2:3617–21 (3602–6).

two mothers did *not* meet when they were pregnant. Such a denial refutes any such miracle on the grounds that the whole story is a mere fiction, thus obviating the possibility of the miracle arising. This is of course, indirectly, also a denial of what the story was intended to convey in Christian tradition, namely the divine sanction of the prophet John and of Jesus.

The foolish say, 'Delete this fantasy,
because it is a falsehood and mistaken!
For Mary in the course of her confinement
was far away from family and strangers!
Till she gave birth, that maid of sweet enchantment
remained outside the town and did not enter!
And in her pregnancy she met no one,
and did not journey in from out of town!
She bore the child, then held him to her bosom
and took him to present him to her kin!
So where had John the Baptist's mother seen her
to tell this tale of what had taken place?'⁷

The story of the unborn prophets' bowing to one another serves to underscore their miraculous conceptions, the daughter of Zechariah/Zakariyyā (Elizabeth in the New Testament but unnamed in the Quran) being barren and Mary/Maryam remaining a virgin, according to both the Biblical and Quranic accounts. It is therefore a fine example of how a story conveys a meaning and of how it can be read as a teaching rather than as a history. In the response that follows this objection, Rūmī acknowledges that the two women may have been physically distant from one another, but he chides the sceptic to grasp the meaning in any case instead of questioning the historical veracity of a physical encounter. This doubt is possibly based upon an excessively literalistic interpretation of Quran XIX, in which Mary 'withdrew from her people to an eastern place and she took a veil apart from them'⁸ and 'so she conceived him, and withdrew with him to a distant place'.⁹ Rūmī's riposte is straightforward, chiding the simpleton who doubts the truth of the story with the following words:

They know not that for people of good heart
what's hidden to this world is present for them.
The mother of the Baptist came to Mary
as present to her view though far from sight.
Eyes that are shut may still perceive the Friend
when you have made your eyelids like a lattice.
Though she may not have *seen* her in or outside—
just grasp the story's meaning, silly fool!
Not like the man who's heard some mythic tales
and got caught up in some *myth-understanding*.¹⁰

To make the point in even more vivid (and popular) terms, he exposes the literalistic objection to this story as foolish by projecting it onto the more obviously fictitious stories of folk traditions that include animals speaking to one another—in order to show that the inventions of stories are always to convey meaning and not to represent historical events.

He'd say 'How could that tongue-tied beast Kalila
take in the words that came from speechless Dimna?

⁷ Ibid. 3622–7 (3607–11).

⁸ Quran XIX:16–17 *intabadhat min ahlihā makānan sharqiyyan fattakhadhat min dūnihim hijāban*.

⁹ Ibid. 22 *faḥamalathu fantabadhatbihi makānan qaṣiyyan*.

¹⁰ *Masnavi* 2:3628–32 (3612–16).

And if they understood each other's babbling,
how could a human understand such nonsense?
How could that Dimna act as messenger
to lion and oxen, charming both with stories?
How was the noble ox the lion's vizier?
How come the elephant feared the moon's reflexion?
This *Kalila and Dimna's* all invention,
or why's a stork debating with a crow?'¹¹

His conclusion is neatly expressed in the analogy of the pair of scales. Like the story, it exists only as an instrument to balance the grain of meaning. It is not as an end in itself.

O brother, story's like a pair of scales,
the meaning's like the grain that's in the balance.
The clever man will take the grain of meaning,
he will not see the scales, like they're not there.
Hear what the rose and nightingale are saying
though literally there is no speech appearing.¹²

This story, which justifies poetic truth and the fabrication of story as valid in order to communicate meaning, and this communication of meaning takes precedence over the supposed quasi-facts of dogma – this is what Rumi is asserting here. Rumi is after all and first and foremost a teacher. He wants us to understand things, and understand them in a new, enlightened way. Here for example in the *Fihi mā fihi* he takes the same scene and delivers a profound message that is central to our theme of the birth of God in the human soul:

It was not until the pains of birth manifested in Mary that she made for the tree. Those pangs drove her to the tree, and the tree that was withered became fruitful. We are like that story of Mary in the Koran. Every one of us has a Jesus within, but until the pangs manifest, our Jesus is not born. If the pangs never come, then our child rejoins its origin by the same secret path through which it came, leaving us empty, without the birth of our true self.¹³

Now let us compare this with a passage that will be familiar to you in a cultural sense, if not in an experiential sense.

‘Where is he who is born King of the Jews?’ Now note where this birth takes place: ‘Where is he who is born...?’ But I say, as I have often said, that this birth takes place in the soul just as it takes place in eternity, no more and no less. For there is only *one* birth, and this takes place in the essence and ground of the soul.

But this raises certain questions. Firstly, since God exists spiritually in all things and is by nature more inwardly present in things than they are in themselves, and since wherever God is he must act and know himself and speak his Word, we are bound to ask which are the particular characteristics of the soul that make it more responsive to this action of God than other rational creatures which God indwells in the same way. Now take note of the following answer!

God exists in all things essentially, actively and powerfully. But he is fertile in the soul alone. If all creatures are the footprint of God, then the soul alone is naturally made in his image. The birth must serve to adorn and perfect this image. And the soul, alone of all creatures, is responsive to God's action and birth. Truly, whatever form of perfection enters the soul,

¹¹ Ibid. 3633–37 (3617–21).

¹² Ibid. 3638–40 (3622–4).

¹³ ch. 12, ed. & tr. Thackston, p. 57.

whether divine, simple light or grace or blessedness, this must all enter the soul with this birth and in no other way. If you just wait for this birth to take place in you, you will find all that is good, all consolation, all bliss, all being and all truth. If you miss it, then you will miss all that is good and all blessedness. Whatever enters you in this birth, brings you pure being and enduring substance, but whatever you seek which is outside this birth shall perish – take it as and where you will, still it will all perish. Only this gives being, all else passes. But in this birth you will partake in the divine influx and all its gifts.¹⁴

A clue:



These are the words of Rumi's near contemporary, the Dominican Master, known as Meister Eckhart, 1260-1328, writing a few years after Rumi's death in 1273. As his translator, Oliver Davies says, in Meister Eckhart's writings

central figures such as 'the birth of God in the soul', or indeed 'the ground or spark of the soul' function as metaphors and not as calculated theological propositions. They serve not so much as details of an argument but as vehicles of expression to stir and move the imagination of Eckhart's audience.¹⁵

As in other places, Davies could have been speaking of Rumi.

We have nearly reached the end, and I am sure you have got my point. But just to make sure I have just translated a passage from towards the end of the third book of the *Masnavi*. It is an example of what we literarywals call a 'narrative leap'. As one of the great Iranian literary scholars alive today, Husayn Elahi-Ghomshei, has said, in comparing Rumi with his predecessor Attar,

... the elements of ecstasy, intoxication, passion and, in general, mystical awareness, are more strongly evoked and evinced in the works of Rumi than that of 'Attār. Rumi's flights of poetic imagination are far loftier, the eloquence of his poetic expression more refined and sophisticated than that of 'Attar. 'Attar always keeps a tight grip on the reins of speech. His particular style of verse is sober: he proceeds methodically, step by step. In this respect his ability to preserve a story line and hold together the unity of the narrative is simply inimitable. In contrast, Rumi appears mounted on a wild colt, gripping the reins of speech more loosely, so that he seems to let the steed of his verse gallop on of its own accord. Often he lets the reins of his discourse – the thread of story – drop from his hand entirely. Taking flight on the Pegasus of his own transcendent inspiration, he soars into the heavens of higher imagination and understanding, whence he brings back for us – plodding pedestrian wayfarers – strange

¹⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart Selected Writings*, tr. Oliver Davies. London: Penguin, 1994, Sermon 24, p. 215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Introduction, xxxiv.

spiritual insights full of subtle celestial modes of thought. When from that Empyrean he finally descends to tread alongside us common mortals upon the face of the earth again, he picks up the reins and resumes the thread of his tale.¹⁶

Husayn Elahi-Ghomshei draws attention to such narrative leaps in the story of Sadr-e Jahan in the third book of the *Masnavi*, where shortly after beginning the story he starts another story apparently unconnected about the apparition of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, Mother of Jesus where he presents us with one of the most beautiful and eloquent accounts of the apparition of an angel to a human being in all of world literature. I leave you with this, my new, as yet unpublished, translation of the passage, just as Rumi has parted company with his own main story:

As Mary did, before you lose possessions,
 say to the form, I shelter in God's Mercy.
Once Mary saw a form so soul-uplifting,
 uplifting and heart-stealing, in her chamber
That trusted spirit did rise up before her
 out of the earth just like the moon and sun.
3705 Out of the earth rose beauty all unveiled,
 just as the sun that rises from the East.
A trembling overtook the limbs of Mary,
 for she was unveiled and she feared attack
A form, such as if Jacob's Joseph saw it
 he'd cut his hands in horror like the women,
It flowered for her like a rose out of the earth
 as from the heart a vision lifts its head.
Beside herself was Mary, and distraught
 she said, 'I'll leap into the Lord's protection!'
3710 For that pure-hearted one was much accustomed
 to take herself in flight to the Unseen,
For since she judged the world a fleeting kingdom,
 she wisely made a fortress of that Presence,
That at the time of death she'd have a stronghold
 and enemies have no way to attack her.
No better fortress did she see than God's
 protection, and she chose to pitch her tent there,
Because she saw those seering amorous glances
 by which all hearts are pierced as if by arrows...
3770 When Mary was so suddenly afflicted
 like fishes who are thrown upon the land,
that paragon of graciousness addressed her
 'I am the Lord's most trusted. Fear me not!
Turn not from those exalted by His Greatness,
 do not shrink back from such good confidants.'
As he said this a ray of perfect light
 was escalating from his lips to heaven
You're fleeing from my being to non-existence,
 the realm where I am king and standard bearer
My home and dwelling is in non-existence,
 my form alone stands here before this Lady.

¹⁶ Husayn Elahi-Ghomshei 'Of scent and sweetness: Attar's legacy in Rumi Shabistari and Hafiz, in L. Lewisohn and C. Shackle (eds), *Attar in the Persian Sufi Tradition: The art of spiritual flight*, London, New York: I.B.tauris 2006, 31 and n. 12.

3775 Mary! See me, a form inscrutable!
 I am the new moon and a vision in the heart
 When such a vision settles in your heart,
 it stays with you wherever you may flee.
 Except ephemeral and worthless visions,
 which fade and are declining like false dawns.
 For I am like the true dawn of the Lord's light,
 there is no night time prowling round my daytime.
 Don't give me "God protect me!", Imran's daughter,
 for I have come down here from "God protect me"!¹⁷

3780 My roots and sustenance were "God protect me"
 the light of "God protect" before the scripture!
 You're taking refuge in the Lord from me,
 I am the pristine image of such refuge.
 I am the refuge of your past deliverances,
 you seek refuge from me: I am the refuge.
 There's nothing worse than lack of recognition,
 You're with the Friend and know not how to love.
 You think the friend is someone unfamiliar
 you give the name of grief to something joyful.⁷

3785 The palm-tree such as this which is our grace
 you make our cross as if we are the robber.
 Such musk that is the ringlet of our prince,
 it is our shackle, since we're unintelligent.¹⁷

Thank you for your kind attention.

¹⁷ *Masnavi* 3.3772 -3786, tr. Alan Williams.