

English interview with Haris Dubravac on the occasion of Rumi's death day (translated into Bosnian and published in *Preporod* 51, no. 23 [2021]: 30–31).

Q: At the outset, we would like to ask you how do you explain the phenomenon that in a small country like Bosnia, almost six thousand kilometers from Rumi's birthplace, his works have been constantly studied for over five hundred years?

MR: The answer to this question has two dimensions. The first and most obvious one is that, as scholars such as Hamid Algar have shown, Persian language and culture have been part and parcel of Bosnian intellectual and spiritual life from the Ottoman period to the present. We thus have such major Ottoman Bosnian Persianists as Ahmad Sudi (d. 1591), who wrote an Ottoman Turkish exposition of Rumi's *Masnavi*, and the work of his important student Derviš Pasha (d. 1602), who hailed from Mostar (whose strong Mevlevi presence goes back to the sixteenth century). By the time we get to the twentieth century, we find a number of key individuals who helped spread the teachings of Rumi in Bosnia. There was, firstly, the official leader of the Muslims in Bosnia Hadži Džemaludin-efendija Čaušević (d. 1938). He publicly taught the *Masnavi* for years, which was a practice that was then followed by Hadži Mujaga Merhemić (d. 1959), a man who is famous for having introduced the long-standing *shab-i 'arus* celebration in commemoration of the death of Hazrat-i Mevlana. We can also mention the contributions of Fejzulah Hadžibajrić (d. 1990), who was a major propagator of Rumi's teachings through writing, translation, and institution building.

The other dimension, which is much more important than the first, concerns the timelessness of Rumi's teachings. No matter where we may be in space and time, and no matter what language we may speak, he will always be able to speak to people and people will always be drawn to his writings. As one of my teachers once said, "There is nothing more timely than the timeless." Rumi's poems address the most essential aspects of human existence, of the meaning of life, and of the significance and purpose of love as we walk through the maze of life. His art of storytelling, his sublime *ghazals*, and his ability to bring out the depth and spiritual dimension of even the most seemingly mundane aspects of existence are among the reasons why he has always been so well received in your country and indeed the world over. In Sufi parlance, we would say that the positive reception of Mevlana in Bosnia and other places is due to the *barakat* of his sacred presence, his name, and his image. This *barakat* offers the lovers of Mevlana a unique form of guidance, assistance, and protection even in places that have been witness to so many unfortunate human tragedies and the spiritually corrosive influence of secularism and materialism.

Q: How do we “save” Rumi from, on the one hand, a fashionable academic approach and, on the other, the misuse of his poetry by New Age ideologues?

MR: Scholarship on Rumi in the academy today is for the most part quite good and reliable. This is largely due to the excellent work that has already been done on him over the past hundred years in both the east and the west. At present, there is also a wonderful journal dedicated exclusively to Rumi and his legacy, *The Mawlana Rumi Review*, which was founded by the late Leonard Lewisohn and is now being edited by Franklin Lewis and published by Brill. Of course, there are those odd studies that still come out every once in a while that seek to subject Mevlana’s teachings to one passing academic trend or another. But these kinds of studies are usually seen for what they are, and few Rumi scholars (if any) take them seriously.

The misuse of Rumi’s poetry by New Age spiritualists and the like is a much more real problem. They more often than not discard or simply disregard Rumi’s thoroughly Islamic worldview and attempt to present him as a modern day New Age guru who can help them solve their real life spiritual problems. Of course, the form and function of Rumi’s message go hand in hand, and his being a Muslim is not at all incidental to his spiritual message. The way Rumi is to be rescued from this kind of an unfortunate appropriation—despite the fact that it has been useful to people and has awakened in at least some of them a quest for authentic spirituality—is for those who are qualified to understand and explain what his teachings are really about to do so whenever the opportunity arises.

There are many fine pieces of scholarship on Rumi, translations of his works, and even websites that can be drawn upon to help bring those invested in the New Age image of Rumi back to a proper understanding of his life, religious context, and spiritual teachings. Among works in English, one can recommend Annemarie Schimmel’s *The Triumphal Sun*, Ibrahim Gamard’s website <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/>, the two chapters on Rumi in Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Gholamreza Aavani’s *Rumi: A Philosophical Study*, William Chittick’s *The Sufi Path of Love*, and Franklin Lewis’ biography, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*.

Additionally, one fundamentally important point to drive home in such contexts is that, for Rumi, as with every other major spiritual figure in Islam, there is no real distinction between intellectuality and spirituality. New Age spiritualists operate on the assumption that the two are mutually exclusive, and herein is the main problem in terms of their approach to Rumi. The great representatives of the Sufi tradition would never look at the world in so dichotomous a way. Indeed, the New Age spiritualists are not to be blamed for their bifurcated worldview—we must remember that New Ageism is a response to the hyper-rationality and

materialism of the so-called civilized West, where, long ago, religious symbolism and higher orders of knowing were sacrificed at the altar of rationalism and scientism.

Q: One Bosnian researcher wrote a work on the Mevlevi tradition in which he devoted more space to Rumi's son than to Rumi himself, probably wanting to point out the significance of the interpretive tradition. How important are the continuators of Rumi's teaching actually in the process of living what Rumi was talking about?

MR: Knowing of and benefiting from the longstanding tradition of Mevlana's successors, beginning with his son Sultan Walad, is indeed important. Mevlana's heirs have preserved the secret (*sirr*) of Mevlana's teachings and have transmitted his *barakat* throughout the ages. By the grace of God, some years ago a Mevlevi master gave us a prayer which can be recited before reading the *Masnavi*. There is no doubt that there is a qualitative difference when the *Masnavi* is read with this prayer as opposed to when it is not read with it. Nevertheless, God's mercy and the universality of Rumi's teachings also ensure that those who are sincere, who are seeking to learn from Rumi's sacred presence, and want to become a friend of his Friend, will always have a way to do so with or without access to the living Mevlevi tradition. Countless people across the globe have never met a Mevlevi master, or have never read the work of someone like Sultan Walad, or Shams-i Tabrizi, or Aflaki, but have been able to greatly benefit from the *Masnavi* and Rumi's other writings, such as his *Divan* and his *Fihi ma fihi*. As Mevlana makes clear, the most important condition for the Path is to come with sincerity and *adab*, and to cling fast to the mantle of the Prophet.

Q: It is noticeable that Rumi had excellent relations with the then authorities in Konya. How important would it be today for rulers to listen to the profound insights of the realizers (*muhaqqiqun*) and not to pursue short-term goals that will enable them the next term?

MR: Yes indeed, Rumi had good relations with political rulers and used his position and influence to urge them to do good for people and society at large. His letters that have come down to us contain many forms of advice to local rulers, urging them, for example, to provide charity for certain people in need, to help those who are suffering, etc.

Without the insights and guidance of the true realizers, worldly rulers will not be guided by the timeless light and wisdom that has aided many great Muslim rulers, like Hazrat 'Ali and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz from the past, and the likes of the founder of the UAE Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in our own times. Political rulers, like the rest of us, should put the question of self-knowledge ahead of everything else. Everyone in the world is too busy doing

this and that, and everyone is chasing some thing or another. But as Rumi would tell us, there is only one prize; but there are very few real seekers after that prize! If rulers come to know themselves and give their own souls their rightful due, which is to realize divine oneness in themselves so that it transforms their entire being, then they will necessarily radiate and promote that goodness and God-given knowledge onto the world, bringing it into every domain, from the political and the economic, to the ethical and the religious.

Q: Finally, if you could end this interview with Rūmī's verses that in your understanding could summarize his glorious legacy?

MR: Yes indeed. I have always loved these verses from the *Masnavi* which nicely summarize the heart of Rumi's message:

عقل جزوی عقل را بدنام کرد کام دنیا مرد را بی کام کرد

The partial intellect has given the Intellect a bad name.

Desire for the world has made man desire-less for the things of God.