

Article

The Cross in Rūmī's Maṭnawī

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Abstract: A cursory reading of Rūmī's Maṭnawī suggests that the author follows the dominant Qur'ānic interpretation denying Jesus Christ's Crucifixion. Closer analysis demonstrates, however, that Rūmī interprets the Cross and considers its spiritual significance in a subtle and symbolic way. This study addresses this contradiction by developing a synthesis that clarifies Rūmī's spiritual anthropology. In the Islamic context, his writing constitutes a significant attempt to understand and interpret the Christian Scriptures and overcome sensitive points of conflict that are considered dividing lines between the faiths.

Keywords: Rūmī; Maṭnawī (Mathnawī); mystical theology; Sufi theology; comparative theology; Sufi hermeneutics; cross theology; cross; Sufism; Sufi poetry; Jesus Christ; passion; Muslim-Christian relations

1. The Cross in the Qur'ān

Jesus Christ is an important figure in Sufi literature, particularly Persian mystical poetry. He is seen as a great prophet, a perfect saint, an ascetic and itinerant sage, and a healer who raises the dead. He is the prototype and model of the Sufi (cf. [Chialà 2009](#); [Khalidi 2001](#); [Skali and De Vitray-Meyerovitch 2004](#); [Schimmel 1996](#)). Despite the abundance of texts about Jesus in this literature, the Crucifixion remains taboo because of the way in which its denial has become quite a "doctrine" in Islamic theology. A careful study of the history of Islamic thought in fact shows that there is no consensus on denying the Crucifixion, which nevertheless remains the dominant position to this day (cf. [Lawson 2009](#)). Since the formative period of Islamic theology, the denial has become entrenched in Islamic polemics as a dividing line that served to forge a separate identity. The great Mutazilite theologian and judge 'Abd al-Ġabbār (d. 415/1025) considered the denial of the Crucifixion a sign of the truthfulness of Muḥammad's prophecy. Apparently, it was more convenient not to challenge the Jewish-Christian historical consensus, "the two adversaries [Jews and Christians] agreed, and the judge refused." ('[Abd al-Ġabbār 1966](#), vol. 1, p. 122).

The Qur'ānic verse used to justify the denial is the following:

And for their saying, 'We have killed the Christ, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God.' In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but *šubbiha* to them. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise. (Q 4, 157–58)

The ambivalent key verb, *šubbiha*, the passive form of *šabbaha*, could be derived from *šubha*, which means confusion, ambiguity, or uncertainty. The verse can therefore be translated: they were led into confusion, it was made to appear as such to them, or it only seemed as such to them. It could also be derived from *šabah*, resemblance, from which the translation "but [another] was made to resemble him to them."¹ The substitution legend, the origins of which predate the advent of Islam, puts forth the notion that another man, usually identified as Judas Iscariot, was crucified instead of Jesus Christ, as a punishment for his



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betrayal. The denial of the Crucifixion in the Qur'ān prompted Muslims to invent several alternative scenarios, which created more confusion. Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (m. 604/1210), in his monumental commentary, mentioned four alternative stories to the Crucifixion, concluding: "all these opinions are in conflict and contradiction. God knows better the reality!" (Rāzī 1981, vol. 11, p. 102).

Muslims who do not see a denial of the Crucifixion in the above verse interpret it instead as a criticism addressed to a group of Jews who arrogantly claimed to have killed Jesus, a falsehood given that the Romans crucified him. The verse is also read in the light of others that confirm the triumph of the divine Word that cannot be killed:

They want to extinguish God's Light with their mouths, but God refuses except to complete His Light, even though the disbelievers dislike it. (Q 9, 32)

[God] made the word of those who disbelieved the lowest, while the Word of God is the Highest. God is Mighty and Wise. (Q 9, 40)²

The Qur'ān also exalts martyrdom (Q 3, 169) and recognizes the martyrdom of the prophets (Q 3, 181), (Q 4, 155) which does not contradict any Islamic doctrine.

In classical Islamic thought, Iḥwān al-Ṣafā', the Brethren of Purity, an anonymous Ismā'īlī group (3^d/10th century), explicitly accepted the Crucifixion as true (Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' 2016, pp. 71, 99).³ Perhaps the group's anonymity helped them challenge the majoritarian religious opinion. Another text explicitly acknowledging the Crucifixion is a long poem attributed to al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ (d. 309/922) found in the *Uṣṭūr Nāme* (the Camel's book) of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221). In this poem, Ḥallāḡ, crucified in Baghdad, says repeatedly on the cross: I am "like Jesus"⁴.

2. Denying the Cross

Three centuries after Iḥwān al-Ṣafā', a few decades after 'Aṭṭār, Ḡalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) approached the Crucifixion in a paradoxical and complex way. Being a public figure and a well-known scholar,⁵ he was constrained to give due weight to "Orthodox" opinion in order to avoid provoking polemics or backlashes that could create psychological barriers obscuring his spiritual message. In his main didactic work, *Maṭnawī*, some passages seem to sustain the denial, while others seem to accept the Cross's spiritual value.

James Roy King asserts that Rūmī adhered to the traditional line of argument regarding the denial of the Crucifixion: "Rūmī's view of the crucifixion is distinctly Islamic: he suggests that the Christian interpretation of events leaves Christians completely vulnerable" (King 1990, p. 83). King's claim is deduced from these verses:

See the ignorance of the Christian appealing for protection to the Lord who was suspended [on the Cross]!

Since, according to his [the Christian's] belief, He was crucified by the Jews, how then can He [Jesus] protect him?

Inasmuch as the heart of that King [Jesus] bleeds on account of them [the Christians], how should there be [for them] the inviolable defense of *while you are among them?* [M 2, 1401–1403]⁶

In this passage, there is no explicit denial. On the contrary, the bleeding heart of Jesus could be an allusion to the Crucifixion, and these verses could be a critique of the Christian practice of viewing active participation in Christ's pain and wounds during Easter as an instrument of forgiveness and salvation. This interpretation is compatible with Rumi's critique of similar practices in the Śī'a milieu, as will be demonstrated later. The Cross is not mentioned but implicit in the phrase, "the Lord who was suspended [on the Cross]." The last verse contains an allusion to the Qur'ānic verse in which Jesus says:⁷

I only told them what You commanded me: that you shall worship God, my Lord and your Lord. And I was a witness over them *while I was among them*; but when *tawaffaytanī* [You has caused me to die], you became the Watcher over them, You are Witness over everything. (Q 5, 117) (emphasis is mine)

In this verse, the expression *tawaffaytanī* indicates the death of Jesus, and that he was the guarantor of the righteousness of his followers until the time of his death.⁸ After that point, God is the eternal Witness over them.

Another passage in the *Maṭnawī* concerning the denial led Nicholson (*Rūmī 1925–1940*, vol. 7, p. 174, vol. 8, p. 395) and King (*King 1990*, p. 83) to conclude that Rūmī adopted the substitution theory, which claims that another person was crucified instead of Jesus:

A certain Amīr cunningly shadows Jesus: Jesus hides himself in the house.

He [the Amīr] enters in order that he may wear the crown: because of his likeness to Jesus he himself becomes the crown of the gibbet [*dār*].

“Oh, do not hang me: I am not Jesus, I am the Amīr, and I am well-disposed to the Jews.”

“Hang him on the gibbet,” “with all speed, for he is Jesus: seeking to escape from our hands by personating another.” [M 6, 4367–4370]

The term *dār* is translated “gibbet” by Nicholson, but it may be translated as “cross.” The same word is used in the sense of the “Cross” of Jesus Christ, *dār-e Masīḥā*, or *dār-e ʿĪsā*, in the *Shahnameh* of Abū al-Qāsim al-Firdawsī (Ferdowsi) (d. 411/1020?), the masterpiece of Persian literature (*Ferdowsi 2017–2018*, vol. 8, pp. 256, 326, verses: Kosrow Parviz 3353, Shirawayh 36, 37).

Rūmī invents stories that serve his didactic goals or modifies existing ones to fit his purposes. In Rūmī’s version of the substitution theory, the substitute is, surprisingly, an anonymous prince. Perhaps he added this detail to emphasize the gulf between Jesus and those who wielded political power, represented by the Amīr. In the story, the prince believes that Jesus possesses a magical power represented by the crown, and follows Jesus like his shadow in order to steal this power. However, his devious plan to steal the “sacred” power fails, and he is punished and crucified instead of Jesus. In this context, the “crown” is a paradoxical symbol of power because Jesus had no crown other than the “crown of thorns” that the Roman soldiers put on his head at the moment of Crucifixion (Mt 27, 29; Mk 15, 17; Jn 19, 2). This symbol therefore confirms the Crucifixion rather than denying it. It seems, then, that Rūmī was chiefly concerned with criticizing worldly interference in the spiritual realm. By playing with the sacred, the politically powerful risk their own demise.

3. Meditating the Cross

As already noted, there are other passages in the *Maṭnawī* in which Rūmī comments on the Crucifixion, albeit in a subtle and symbolic manner. He begins by mentioning “Jesus forsaken”:

Forsaking Jesus, you have fostered the donkey: of necessity, like the donkey, you are outside of the curtain.

Knowledge and gnosis are the fortune of Jesus; they are not the fortune of the donkey, O you asinine one!

You listen to the moaning of the donkey, and pity comes over you; then you, know not [that] the donkey commands you to be asinine.

Have pity on Jesus and have no pity on the donkey: do not make the [carnal] nature lord over your intellect.

Let the nature weep sore and bitterly: do not take from it and pay the debt of the soul. [M 2, 1850–1854]

Rūmī uses an image from the Gospel (Mt 21, 1–11; Mk 11, 1–11; Lk 19, 28–44; Jn 12, 12–19), which is absent from the Qurʾān, concerning Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem seated on a colt on Palm Sunday and the joyous crowd that welcomed him. The same people, a week later, abandoned him on the Cross. Here, Rūmī ironically wonders whether the masses were celebrating Jesus, or the donkey! What good is partaking in great celebrations, he wonders, if one feels no compassion at the time of Passion? The image of “Jesus forsaken” is unthinkable without the Crucifixion. The climax and the origin of “Jesus forsaken” is his

cry on the Cross: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?) (Mt 27, 46; Mk 15, 34).⁹ However, in Rūmī’s version, Jesus was forsaken by the people, which is no small difference.

After this introductory passage, Rūmī addressed the Cross directly without naming it; he used instead an allusive term, *‘ūd*, aloes-wood, while he uses the allegory of “fire” to denote the Passion. Rūmī addresses Jesus thus:

Your heart is roasted by the fire of these unrighteous men, [yet] all your appeal has been, “Guide my people!”

You are a mine of aloes-wood: if they set you afire, they will fill this world with otto¹⁰ of roses and sweet basil.

You are not that aloes-wood that is diminished by the fire: you are not that spirit that is made captive by grief.

Aloes-wood burns, the mine of aloes-wood is far from burning: how should the wind assail the source of light?

Oh, it is from you the heavens have purity; oh, your unkindness is better than kindness,

Because if an unkindness come from the wise it is better than the kindness of the ignorant.

The Prophet said, “Enmity [proceeding] from wisdom is better than the love that comes from a fool.”¹¹ [M 2, 1871–1877]

The image of fire recalls Abraham’s miracle mentioned in (Q 21, 68–70), the difference being that Abraham was saved from the fire in which the people had thrown him: “We said, O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham.” In Rūmī’s verses, the wood is consumed in the fire.

This passage can be considered a commentary on the Qur’ānic verse: “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him” (Q 4, 157). It can also be considered in light of the verse: “They want to extinguish with their mouths the light of God, whereas God only wants to complete His light, no matter how much the disbelievers dislike it,” (Q 9, 32), and (Q 61, 8). Rūmī’s depiction of the Passion offers the vivid image of burning incense in a fusion of three intense aromas, aloe-wood, rose oil, and sweet basil, indicating the royal character of Christ. Fire is an ambivalent symbol in Maṭnawī and Sufi literature. Jesus was “consumed” by fire, a paradoxical expression of love and enmity similar to that of the Cross. His burning represents his transformation into universal and eternal perfumes and light. Beyond his death, there is the revelation of his Essence. In Sufi terms, burning is the symbol of *fanā’*, annihilation, and the royal perfumes are the symbol of *baqā’*, permanence and resurrection.

In the passage just mentioned, there are allusions to New Testament passages related to the Crucifixion, which makes Rūmī’s passage an indirect commentary on the Gospel:

1. The prayer attributed to Jesus, “Guide my people,” is similar to the prayer mentioned in Luke’s Gospel: “When they reached the place called the Skull, there they crucified him and the two criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, *Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing,*” (Lk 23, 34, the cursive is added). Similar phrasing is found in a prophetic tradition, ḥadīth, in which Muḥammad attributed the words to an unnamed prophet: “It was narrated that ‘Abd Allāh [b. Mas‘ūd] said: It is as if I can see the Messenger of God, telling [or imitating] the story of one of the prophets who was beaten by his people, and he wiped the blood from his face and said: “Lord forgive my people, for they do not know [what they are doing]” (Muslim 2007, K. al-ḡihād, ḥadīth 1792, vol. 5, p. 99).
2. The dichotomies of unkindness/kindness and wise-wisdom/ignorant-fool mentioned by Rūmī are comparable to Paul’s discourse on the Cross as wisdom, scandal, and folly: “Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognize God through wisdom, it was God’s own pleasure to save believers through the folly of the gospel. While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, we are preaching a

crucified Christ: to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the gentiles foolishness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's folly is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (I Cor 1, 21–25).

Rūmī insists on the glorious and joyful character of the fire of the Passion: "You are not that aloes-wood that is diminished by the fire: you are not that spirit that is made captive by grief." In Christian terms, the Cross is already "Resurrection," and never separated from it. Death is always seen in the light of resurrection. This consideration explains Rūmī's critique of certain Christian practices of mourning during Easter or of Šī'ī lamentation in 'Āšūrā', which we will see later. This idea is expressed clearly in this verse:

Your Resurrection declares what is the secret of death: the fruits declare what is the secret of the leaves. [M 2, 1825]

Rūmī, whose language is not Christocentric, expresses the essential spiritual experience of death and resurrection in many ways, including in Christological terms. What concerns him is the experience itself, the spiritual transformation or conversion, rather than the narrative medium through which it takes place. Rūmī's priority is the centrality of the experience of God in human life and the death and resurrection of each person without regard for language, or even without language, in absolute silence. This fundamental Truth is not the exclusive domain of a privileged few; it is the elixir of human transformation, the instrument of divinization and sanctification.

Apparently, the Maṭnawī's commentators could not see the allusions to Jesus Christ and the Cross, probably because they did not have the biblical knowledge necessary to perceive this intertextuality.¹² Another possible reason is the same one that prompted Rūmī to encrypt his speech, which was to avoid provoking an outcry given the sensitivity in public opinion to any reference to the Bible or the doctrines of other religions. The following example confirms Rūmī's knowledge of the Bible and the opposition to it among the people.

4. Challenging Public Opinion

To understand why Rūmī had to avoid the explicit use of the word "Cross" and resorted instead to symbolic and veiled language, we must consider the dogmatization of the denial of the Crucifixion. Furthermore, there were objections to using biblical sources due to the "doctrine" of Scriptural falsification, *taḥrīf* (cf. Newby 2002). Reference to other Scriptures was seen as a sign of weakness of faith, especially when the narratives are opposed or simply absent in Islamic sources. Rūmī's open attitude toward the Scripture in other faith traditions did not go unnoticed, as it seems he regularly faced the consequences of such dogmatic rigidity during his life. The Maṭnawī attests to moments of tension and protest when he tried to integrate the Christian Scriptures into his ideas, to the point that his lectures became an arena for debate and polemics.

Rūmī once attempted to comment on a Gospel story outside the context of the Crucifixion but subsequently modified his discourse in response to criticism. In the end, Rūmī did not return to the initial story, which remains incomplete and without comment, a rare occurrence in the Maṭnawī. He begins by quoting the story of the Visitation (Lk 1, 39–56):

The mother of Yaḥyā, before disburdening herself [of him], said in secret to Mary, "I see with certainty, within you is a King who is possessed of firm purpose and is an Apostle endowed with knowledge.

When I happened to meet you, my burden at once bowed in worship.

This embryo bowed in worship to that embryo, so that pain arose in my body from its bowing."

Mary said, "I also felt within me a bowing performed by this babe in the womb." [M 2, 3602–3606]

The short speech was immediately interrupted by vehement protest:

The foolish say, "Cancel this tale, because it is false and erroneous.

Mary in [her] pregnancy was not joined by any one: she did not return from without the town.

Until that woman of sweet address was delivered outside of the town, she indeed came not into it.

When she had given birth to him, she then took him up in her lap and carried him to her kinsfolk.

Where did the mother of Yaḥyā see her to speak these words to her about what had happened?" [M 2, 3607–3611]

This protest concerns an issue less critical than the Cross; nevertheless, it caused an uproar. The objection was based on the Qurʾānic verses that emphasize Mary's distance from the people as soon as she conceived Jesus:

So she conceived him, and secluded herself with him in a remote place. (Q 19, 22)

The Marian retreat, in this understanding, contradicts the Visitation, which implies meeting people. The isolation, which was also a withdrawal from the city, is interpreted in an absolute and literalist way from conception to childbirth:

The labor-pains came upon her, by the trunk of a palm-tree. She said, "I wish I had died before this, and been completely forgotten." Whereupon he called her from beneath her: "Do not worry; your Lord has placed a stream beneath you. And shake the trunk of the palm-tree towards you, and it will drop ripe dates by you." (Q 19, 23–25)

Mary's first public appearance was after giving birth, when she carried her newborn in her arms and returned to the city to great scandal:

Then she came to her people, carrying him. They said, "O Mary, you have done something terrible." (Q 19, 27)

After this objection, Rūmī embarks on a lengthy response that summarizes his hermeneutical methodology and pedagogical approach. He first argues that the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth was in the world of "ideas," *ḥāṭer*, or in the imaginary world of *ḥayāl*, according to Ibn ʿArabī's terminology (cf. Corbin 2012, pp. 193–257). It is the world of souls and the Spirit, the world of revelation and encounter with God, and that of prophets and saints. It is a paradoxical world that is real and present, *ḥāḍer*, but at the same time absent and invisible. This world is neither a lie nor a symptom of madness, but is in fact more real than apparent reality. Indeed, it is the origin of creation.

Let him [the objector] know that to one who receives ideas all that is absent in the world is present.

To Mary, the mother of Yaḥyā would appear present, though she was far from her sight. [M 2, 3612–3613]

Rūmī intimates that to understand these stories, one must see them with the heart's inner eye. It is a matter of spiritual taste, *ḍawq*. To reach this level, one must be transparent or, as described by Rūmī, one must have "made the skin a lattice," allowing light to pass through. After that, Rūmī offers a few examples of obstacles that stand in the way of this kind of symbolic understanding: the first is looking at form and image but losing sight of content and meaning, such as one who looks at the letter *š* (*šīn*) in the word *naqš*, which means "image" or "form," instead of contemplating the image. The second example is that of the story of Kalīla and Dimna,¹³ in which the characters are animals who offer pearls of wisdom. Readers or listeners who remain on the surface are unable to get past the fact that animals do not speak. Rūmī was a great storyteller who used a range of sources for his stories: from the Qurʾān to the Bible, to the diverse cultures of the time, and others that he may have invented entirely. Immediately following the previous passage, Rūmī argues that all of his work remains silent if the listener or reader does not possess the mystical hermeneutic key:

One may see a friend [even] with eyes shut, when one has made the skin a lattice.

And if she saw her neither from without nor from within, take the meaning of the story, O imbecile!

Not like him who had heard fables, and like $\text{\textcircled{S}}$ stuck to the shape of them,

So that he would say, "How should Kalīla, having no language, hear words from Dimna who had no power of expression?" [M 2, 3614–3617]

This instructive example should not be interpreted as the author equating the Christian Scriptures with the tales of Kalīla and Dimna. Rūmī's pedagogical goal is rather to remove the distraction caused by attachment to the letter which prevents one from accessing existential and spiritual truths. Physics and metaphysics are two levels of reality which are not contradictory but must be measured by different means. Rūmī's priority is to discover the hidden spiritual meaning behind everything. He then continues in more direct language:

O brother, the story is like a measure: the real meaning in it resembles grain.

The man of intelligence will take the grain of meaning: he will not pay any regard to the measure, [even] if it is removed.

Listen to what passes between the rose and the nightingale, though in that case there is no overt speech. [M 2, 3622–3624]

Afterwards, in another section entitled "On mute eloquence and the understanding of it," he attempts to open the eyes of his audience with more examples and anecdotes:

Listen also to what passes between the moth and the candle, and pick out the meaning, O worshipful one.

Albeit there is no speech, there is the inmost soul of speech. Come, fly aloft, do not fly low, like the owl. [M 2, 3625–3626]

What indeed matters is *sirr-e goft*, the "inmost soul of speech," or the "mystery of the words," which is inexhaustible. The key to this mystery is precisely love, which is the only way to free ourselves from the ego indicated by the image of the moth and the candle. This image, well known in Sufi literature, symbolizes annihilation (*fanā'*) in the fire of love and in the beloved/Beloved. Without this annihilation, access to the deeper meaning of life is impossible.

5. Jesus and Ḥusayn

As mentioned earlier, Rūmī's critique of Easter rites is comparable to his critique of Šī'a 'Āšūrā' mourning ceremonies. The first ten days of Muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, are days of mourning for the anniversary of the Karbalā' massacre in 61/680, in which Ḥusayn, the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson, and members of his Family were killed. The tenth and final day, 'Āšūrā' represents the culmination of the commemoration. A story in the Maṭnawī, probably fictional, recounts the entry of a foreign poet into Aleppo on the day of 'Āšūrā' in a Šī'a neighborhood called the Antioch Gate. The traveler was unfamiliar with the mourning rituals and came under the impression that an important noble man of the city had died. He began to ask provocative and embarrassing questions, hoping to take the opportunity to recite a poem of eulogy, as it would have been well rewarded. The scene, scandalous and ironic, could be blasphemous to Šī'a sensibilities if understood literally:

A stranger, a poet, arrived from the road on the Day of 'Āšūrā and heard that lamentation.

He left the city and resolved in that direction: he set out to investigate [the cause of] those shrill cries.

He went along, asking many questions in his search, "What is this sorrow? Whose death has occasioned this mourning?"

It must be a great personage who has died: such a concourse is no small affair.

Inform me of his name and titles, for I am a stranger and you belong to the town.

What are his name and profession and character? [Tell me] in order that I may compose an elegy on his gracious qualities.

I will make an elegy—for I am a poet—that I may carry away from here some provision and morsels of food.”

“Eh,” said one [of them], “are you mad? You are not a Šī‘ī; you are an enemy of the [Prophet’s] Family.

Don’t you know that the Day of ‘Āšūrā is [a day of] mourning for a single soul that is more excellent than a generation?

How should this anguish be lightly esteemed by the true believer? Love for the earring is in proportion to love for the ear.

In the true believer’s view the mourning for that pure spirit is more celebrated than a hundred Floods of Noah.” [M 6, 782–792]

In this intense discussion, the Šī‘ī man justifies lamentation as a sign of love and loyalty to the Family of the Prophet and a path for repentance with a salvific and redemptive value, as indicated by the mention of Noah’s flood.¹⁴ Sadness, or its dogmatization, is the point in the poet’s response, used by Rūmī as a mask to get his message across:

“Yes,” said he; “but where is the epoch of Yazīd?¹⁵ When did this grievous tragedy occur? How late has [the news of] it arrived here!

The eyes of the blind have seen that loss, the ears of the deaf have heard that story. Have you been asleep till now, that [only] now you have rent your garments in mourning?

Then, O sleepers mourn for yourselves, for this heavy slumber is an evil death.

A royal spirit escaped from a prison: why should we rend our garments and how should we gnaw our hands?

Since they were monarchs of the religion, it was the hour of joy when they broke their bonds.

They sped towards the pavilion of empire; they cast off their fetters and chains.

It is the day of kingship and pride and sovereignty, if you have an atom of knowledge of them.

And if you have not knowledge, go, weep for yourself, for you are disbelieving in the removal and in the assembly at the Last Judgement.

Mourn for your corrupt heart and religion, for it [your heart] sees nothing but this old earth.

Or if it is seeing, why is it not brave and supporting [others] and self-sacrificing and fully contented?

In your countenance where is the happiness of the wine of religion? If you have beheld the Ocean, where is the bounteous hand?

He that has beheld the River does not grudge water, especially he that has beheld that Sea and [those] Clouds.” [M 6, 793–805]

The poet’s critique is based on two points, the first is historical distance. The question, “Have you been asleep till now?” bluntly makes the point that Ḥusayn was not killed yesterday. In this view, the perpetuating of past events in a cult of history is a distraction. The veneration of other’s holiness is not meaningful unless it is experienced personally and internally. External glorification changes nothing; it is only a soothing or corrupting of the conscience. For Rūmī, narratives should be internalized, where their ferment brings about inner change and personal conversion. Therefore, if one must weep, let him weep for himself and not for Ḥusayn, “go, weep for yourself.”¹⁶

The second point is that ‘Āšūrā’ should be seen as a day of “joy” and not sadness, of “resurrection” and not death. Rūmī describes it as “the day of kingship and pride and

sovereignty,” and “the hour of joy.” Ḥusayn was among “monarchs of the religion,” “a royal spirit escaped from a prison.” Thus, the death or martyrdom of the saints are nuptials and festivals, not mourning and lamentation: “they sped towards the pavilion of empire; they cast off their fetters and chains.” Note that the word “empire,” *dawlat*, also means kingdom, happiness in the afterlife, spiritual joy, and bliss. The Italian translator, Mandel Khan, capitalizes “Kingdom,” a sensible rendering suggesting that he had in mind the Christian equivalent “the Kingdom of God,” an essential element of Jesus Christ’s preaching in the Gospel (Mt 6, 33).

Unlike the Crucifixion, there is no debate concerning the factuality of the massacre of Karbalā’. All Muslims agree on the event’s historicity. The narrative from the Maṭnawī instead critiques the presumed salvific value of sadness associated with the anniversary of Karbalā’, as he did with Christian mourning during Easter. The martyrdom of Jesus Christ and that of Ḥusayn have come to represent a moment of glory and joy. Rūmī’s emphasis is on resurrection rather than death. Indeed, death becomes “nothing” in the face of the fullness of life that begins with the death passage. This perspective recalls the words of Ḥusayn’s sister, Zaynab, after the massacre of her brother and Family. Following the battle, women and children were taken to the palace of the governor of Kūfa as prisoners. Zaynab was confronting ‘Ubayd Allāh Ibn Ziyād, her brother’s killer, when he asked her, “How do you judge what God has done to the people of your house?” Before her brother’s severed head, she said, “I see nothing but beauty” (Clohessy 2018, p. 179).¹⁷

6. Jesus and Ḥallāğ

If we go back and reread the texts of the apparent denial of the Crucifixion, we find confirmation of the comparisons just mentioned. Before his discourse on the mourning rituals of Easter, Rūmī speaks of the suffering of the saints:

It so happened to Dū al-Nūn the Egyptian that a new agitation and madness was born within him.

His agitation became so great that salt from it was reaching hearts up to above the sky.

Beware, O salty soil, do not put your agitation beside the agitation of the holy lords.

The people could not endure his madness: his fire was carrying off their beards.

When [that] fire fell on the beards of the vulgar, they bound him and put him in a prison.

There is no possibility of pulling back this rein, though the vulgar be distressed by this way.

These kings have seen [themselves in] danger of their lives from the vulgar; for this multitude are blind, and the kings [are] without mark.

When authority is in the hands of profligates, Dū al-Nūn is inevitably in prison.

The great king rides alone! Such unique pearl in the hands of children!

What pearl? The Sea hidden in a drop; a Sun concealed in a mote.

A Sun showed itself as a mote, and little by little uncovered its face.

All motes vanished in it; the world became intoxicated by it and [then] became sober.

When the pen is in the hand of a traitor, unquestionably Manṣūr is on a gibbet [dār].

When this affair belongs to the foolish, the necessary consequence is [that] *they kill the prophets*. [Q 3, 112]

Through folly the people who had lost the way said to the prophets, “*Lo, we augur ill from you.*” [Q 36, 18], [M 2, 1386–1400]

These verses, which immediately precede the discourse on the Cross, deal with the suffering of two saints. The first is Dū al-Nūn the Egyptian (d. 245/859 or 248/862), who was not killed, but treated as insane and sent to prison.¹⁸ The second is Maṣṣūr, that is al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāḡ, who was convicted of apostasy, executed, and eventually crucified in Baghdad. In this context, the cross is named *dār*, which is translated as “gibbet,” although it can be translated as “cross,” as we have seen in [M 6, 4370]. In the encrypted discourse on the Cross, Rūmī uses the word *‘ūdī* (aloes-wood) instead [M 2, 1873–74]. Immediately after the mention of Maṣṣūr, there is an explicit reference to the killing of prophets, which is a Qur’ānic reference (Q 3, 112, 181; 4, 155). These elements show that Rūmī’s target in this passage was not the Crucifixion per se, but instead sadness and lamentation, as in the case of Šī‘ī commemorative rites.

Rūmī repeatedly emphasizes the kingship of the saints: “the great king rides alone,” “the holy lords,” “the kings without mark.” It is an invisible kingship which contrasts the hollowness and ignorance of those who hold political power. The two are in fact inversely co-related, and thus “when authority is in the hands of profligates, Dū al-Nūn is inevitably in prison,” and “when this affair belongs to the foolish, the necessary consequence is they kill the prophets.” Kingship coincides with the name Christ (Χριστός, anointed), which is the Greek translation of *Mašīyahī* in Hebrew, the equivalent of the Arabic *Masīhī*. The biblical Prophets and kings used to be anointed as a sign of blessing (1 K 19, 16; 1 Ch 16; 22. Ps 105, 15).

The supreme wisdom of God’s friends is perceived as madness by the masses and by their political and religious leaders as well: “the people could not endure his madness: his fire was carrying off their beards.” The same tension recurs in the verses on the Crucifixion, “You are honey, we are vinegar in this world and in religion,” [M 2, 1867], and, “if an unkindness come from the wise, it is better than the kindness of the ignorant,” [M 2, 1876]. All these elements together consolidate the reasons for accepting the Crucifixion.

7. Mario-Christo-Logy

Many passages in the Maṭnawī emphasize the joyful aspect of sainthood, “love in the sea of sorrow is not sorrowful” (M 2, 1771). In a lengthy passage, Rūmī comments on the Ḥadīṭ Ġadīr Ḥumm, a fundamental text for Shi‘ī doctrine, interpreted as the announcement of ‘Alī’s succession by the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹ The term *mawlā* in Arabic and Persian, mentioned in the hadīṭ, is a complex one which is used by Rūmī in the sense of *walī*, meaning “friend of God” or “saint.” Nicholson, however, translated *mawlā* rather reductively as “protector.” In this passage, sainthood becomes the composite expression of three dimensions in which there is no room for sadness: freedom, joy, and gratitude.

Who is the *mawlā* [saint]? He that sets you free and removes the fetters of servitude from your feet.

Since prophethood is the guide to freedom, freedom is bestowed on true believers by the prophets.

Rejoice, O community of true believers: show yourselves to be “free” as the cypress and the lily;

But do you, like the gay-colored garden, at every moment give unspoken thanks to the Water.

The cypresses and the green orchard mutely thank the water and show gratitude for the justice of Spring:

Clad in robes and trailing their skirts, drunken and dancing and jubilant and scattering perfume;

Every part impregnated by royal spring, their bodies as caskets filled with pearly fruit;

[Like] Maries, having no husband, yet big with a Christ; silent ones, wordless and devoid of articulate expression,

“Our Moon has shone brightly without speech: every tongue has derived its speech from our beauty.”

The speech of Jesus is from the beauty of Mary; the speech of Adam is a ray of the Breath.

In order that from thanksgiving, O men of trust, increase may accrue; then other plants are amidst the herbage.

Here the reverse is, he that is content shall be abased; in this case, he that covets shall be exalted.

Do not go so much into the sack of your fleshly soul; do not be forgetful of your purchasers. [M 6, 4540–4552]

Rūmī’s rejection of mourning and sadness, whether Christian or Šī‘ī, is better understood in light of these verses. He prefers dance and music as performed in the ritual of *samā’* (literally “listening” or “audition”), adopted and developed by him and his community (cf. Ambrosio 2007). The last verses of the passage have a Mario-Christo-logical flavor. Jesus and Mary are inseparable in Rūmī’s mystical theology. They symbolically constitute the human being walking towards God, a framework not detracting from the holiness of these two historical personalities. Rūmī states that “the speech of Jesus is from the beauty of Mary; the speech of Adam is a ray of the Breath” [M 6, 4549]. The word, translated here as “speech,” is *nutq*, which also means “word,” in the sense of Logos, and from which the term *manṭiq*, logic, is derived. The expression translated as “the beauty of Mary” is *farr-e Maryam* in Persian. The term *farr* has pre-Islamic roots dating back to Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, with a rich semantic range:

In traditional interpretations, “glory,” “splendor,” “luminosity” and “shine,” connected with sun and fire, were considered the primary meanings of the term *farr(ah)*, *x^Var nah*. Semantic developments and etymologically secondary meanings related to prosperity, (good) fortune, and (kingly) majesty were also recognized . . . In Buddhist Sogdian and Khotanese the word signified the “position of a Buddha” . . . and it passed into Tokharian with this meaning, derived from the original sense of “dignity” or “high position. (Gnoli 1999)

In Buddhist terms, Mary represents the “illuminated” soul from which the Christ/Buddha is born, whom she always possessed within her as a potential for sainthood. Adam’s intellect and wisdom are but a divine ray of the Breath (*dam*, in Persian). This Breath/Spirit/*Rūḥ* is the same Christ manifested in the human being. The parallel between Adam and Jesus Christ is clear in these Qur’ānic verses:

[God:] When I have fashioned him [Adam] and breathed My Spirit into him, bow down before him (Q 15, 29). See also (Q 32, 9).

Remember the one who guarded her chastity [Mary]. We breathed into her from Our Spirit and made her and her son a sign for the worlds (Q 21, 91). See also (Q 66, 12).

In light of Rūmī’s interpretation, Christ is seen as a second Adam, or Adam as a potential Christ. Christ is Adam’s future in sainthood, the *raison d’être* of his creation, and the realization of his promised potential holiness. A parallel between earth and Mary is also noted in the Qur’ānic verses. However, Rūmī does not see Mary as a mere corporeal medium or a neutral “tube” through which the Spirit passes and Christ is born; she is the soul that has been transformed, and Christ is born from that transformation. Rūmī’s seeks to emphasize the continuity of the person before and after sainthood. That single person discovers their inner divine presence, his or her true and profound identity. The unity between Mary and Jesus, as a symbol of sainthood and the human journey to God, is expressed on several occasions in the Maṭnawī, as in the following verses:

The Universal Soul came into contact with the partial soul, and the [latter] soul received from it a pearl and put it into its bosom.

Through that touch on its bosom the soul became pregnant, like Mary, with a heart-beguiling Christ,²⁰

Not the Christ who is on land and water, the Christ who is beyond measuring.
So when the soul has been impregnated by the Soul of soul, by such a soul the world is impregnated.

Then the world gives birth to another world, and displays to this congregated people a place of congregation.

Though I should speak and recount till the Resurrection, I lack the power to describe this resurrection.

These sayings, indeed, are really an “O Lord”; the words are the lure for the breath of a sweet-lipped One.

How, then, should he fail? How should he be silent, inasmuch as “Here am I” is coming in response to his “O Lord”?

It is a “Here am I” that you cannot hear, but can taste from head to foot. [M 2, 1183–1191]

In these verses, the word “resurrection,” *qiyāmat*, is repeated twice: once to indicate the universal Resurrection or the Last Day. The second concerns the resurrection of each individual in his or her spiritual rebirth. In this sense, Resurrection implies death and in Christological terms, the Cross. Death and resurrection are crucial concepts for Rūmī and the Sufi experience. In this passage, Rūmī prefers to express the same experience in terms of fecundation/birth. He is interested in the experience itself as lived by each person. His mission as a spiritual guide is to transmit the same salvific experience by any means possible, thus opening the inner eyes of his readers to the divine and leading them to discover God’s hidden presence. The true miracle of Christ is not walking on water,²¹ “not the Christ who is on land and water, the Christ who is beyond measuring” [M 2, 1185], but rather the Christ of the inward transformation.²²

Death and resurrection are not only a human experience, but a cosmic journey for all of creation of which the human being is but a part. This is the cosmic movement towards God of the eternal Return:

I died to the inorganic state and became endowed with growth, and [then] I died to [vegetable] growth and attained to the animal.

I died from animality and became Adam: why, then, should I fear? When have I become less by dying?

At the next remove I shall die to man, that I may soar and lift up my head amongst the angels;

And I must escape even from the angel: *everything is perishing except His Face*. [Q 55, 26–27]

Once more I shall be sacrificed and die to the angel: I shall become that which enters not into the imagination.

Then I shall become non-existence: non-existence says to me, as an organ, *Verily, unto Him shall we return*. [Q 2, 156], [M 3, 3901–3906]

Each stage has its dignity and necessity, leading to the next in harmonious continuity and progressive overcoming of obstacles. In this way, one can interpret the Marian origin of the Christic sainthood as part of a universal and cosmic effort.

8. Rūmī’s Christian Milieu

Rūmī’s didactic intent and mission was to convey his spiritual teachings to all regardless of religious affiliation, at times using the doctrinal system of the listener (or Sufi novice) to draw him to the essential spiritual experience. Living in a multireligious context, he

was exposed to different faiths and ways of understanding the world, a fact reflected in his writings.

The Anatolian city where Rūmī lived and taught, Konya (Ikónion, or Ικόνιον in Greek, from Ικόνιο, Icon), is located on the route between Constantinople and Antioch, and has a long Christian legacy, as illustrated by Annemarie Schimmel:

Konya, the ancient Iconium, had been the scene of Christian life since the first abortive attempts of St. Paul at converting its inhabitants (Acts 14); it later became a Christian town, probably influenced by its proximity to Cappadocia, the stronghold of medieval monastic Christianity and native place of some of the greatest of the mystically inclined early Christian theologians (Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianz, St. Basil the Great etc.) The cave monasteries of Göreme were inhabited till the late Middle Ages. Small Greek settlements with their churches were flourishing in the neighborhood of Konya till the end of World War I. (Schimmel 1980, p. 180)²³

The main source for Rūmī's hagiography, written by Aflākī (d. 761/1360), mentions on numerous occasions a disciple named 'Alā' al-Dīn Theryānūs (Θηριανός), who came from a Christian village near Konya (Aflākī 2002, p. 320). This disciple seems to have had a privileged position with the master and was called by Aflākī "the everlasting knower of God" (Aflākī 2002, p. 285) and "the godly companion" (Aflākī 2002, p. 319). Despite his conversion to Islam, his faith aroused doubts, and he was arrested on the charge of considering Rūmī to be God. His response was stranger than the charge:

God forbid! By no means! Rather I say Mowlānā is God-fashioner (khodā-sāz). (Aflākī 2002, p. 190)²⁴

The following anecdote could reveal the Christian spirit of Theryānūs:

Likewise, Akhī Aḥmad, who was one of the esteemed men of the time, one day said to 'Alā' al-Dīn: "I have read a donkey-load (*kharvār*) of books and in them I have found no authorization for the *samā'* and I have not heard of any such permission. What proof have you [to justify] bringing forth this innovation?" 'Alā' al-Dīn replied: 'Akhī read in the manner of a donkey (*kharvār*). That's why he doesn't know. *Praise be to God* that we have read in the manner of Jesus and attained its secret'. (Aflākī 2002, p. 192)

According Theryānūs, then, to read with Jesus' eyes is the best manner to understand Rūmī.

The Christians and Jews of Konya loved Rūmī, and were present at his funeral, as described by Aflākī:

When they brought forth Mowlānā's [Rūmī's] corpse, all the great and small bared their heads. Absolutely all the men, women, and children were present and they raised a tumult which resembled the tumult of the great Resurrection. Everyone was weeping and most men walked along naked, shouting and tearing their clothes. Likewise, all the religious communities with their men of religion and worldly power were present, including the Christians and the Jews, the Greeks, the Arabs and the Turks, and others as well. All of them, in accordance with their customary practice, walked in procession while holding up their [sacred] books. And they recited verses from the Psalms of David, the Torah and the Gospels, and made lamentation. Meanwhile, the Muslims were unable to beat them off with sticks and blows and swords. This group would not be kept away and a great disturbance arose. News of this reached the sultan of Islam, Ṣāheb and the Parvāna. The prominent monks and priests were summoned and told: "What does this event have to do with you? This king of religion is our chief, imam and guide." They answered: "We came to understand the truth of Moses and the truth of Jesus and of all the prophets because of his clear explanation, and we beheld in him the behavior of the perfect prophets we read about in our [sacred]

books. If you Muslims call Mowlānā the Moḥammad of your time, we recognize him to be the Moses of the era and the Jesus of the age. As much as you admire him and are devoted to him, we are bondsmen and disciples a thousand times more so. As the poet said:

Seventy-two religions heard their secret from us.

We're like a flute whose mode fits two hundred creeds.

Thus, Mowlānā's essence is a sun of higher truths which shone on mankind and bestowed favor, and all houses have been illuminated by him." Another priest who was Greek said: "The similitude for Mowlānā is bread. No one can do without bread. Have you ever seen a hungry person who shuns bread? But what do you know about who he was!"

All the prominent men fell silent and said nothing. (Aflākī 2002, pp. 405–6)

This description, written less than a century after Rūmī's death, is essential to our understanding of him. Regardless of the exaggeration typical of hagiographical literature, this account contains important kernels of historical truth. Elements that render it more plausible are the protests against the Christian and Jews present at Rūmī's funeral who were so numerous that they could not be dispersed and prompted the people to call the authorities. These protests recall a similar episode of the Maṭnawī in which Rūmī commented on the Visitation. Other realistic aspects are the responses of the non-Muslims, particularly that of the Greek monk who likens Rūmī to bread. As a Christian symbol, bread is rather fitting for the discourse of a monk. Indeed, he claims to know Rūmī better than the king, exclaiming, "but what do you know about who he was!" The account suggests that he certainly knew better than the angry mob that wanted to monopolize Rūmī's legacy and make it exclusively their own. One also notices the exaggerated expression of crying and lamentation among Rūmī's followers, which contradicts his teaching. Once more, the veneration of the person prevails over putting his teachings into practice.

The love of Jews and Christians for Rūmī attests to his attentiveness to them, and to the fact that they were able to interpret Rūmī's teaching in light of their religious heritage. These teachings are beyond any categorization or religious creed or identity, and this account shows that this universal character was perceived and appreciated even in this early period. Rūmī presents himself as a person who transcends affiliations:

What is to be done, O Muslims? for I do not recognize myself.

I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr (Zoroastrian), nor Moslem.

I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea;

[...]

My place is the Placeless, trace is the Traceless;

It is neither body nor soul, for I belong to the Soul of the Beloved. (Rūmī 1973, p. 79, with slight modification)

Most probably, Rūmī preached to Christians with the narratives they knew best, the New Testament and the Passion of Christ. The essential experiences that Rūmī taught were precisely death and resurrection: the death of the ego and the discovery of the true Self who is the divine presence within, the hidden Christ waiting for the right moment to be born (or risen) in the heart. His writing expressed the same experience in Mario-Christo-logic language and by other means. Rūmī is an expert in rendering this basic principle in a wide range of colors, even in everyday examples.

As mentioned previously, the only theological obstacle before accepting the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the apparent meaning of the Qur'ānic verse (Q 4, 157). The Sufi hermeneutical approach transcends this appearance and digs into the deeper meaning. It considers, first of all, the spiritual exercise and experience that allows one to emerge from the ego and embrace the real Self. Rūmī's interest is not in historical factuality but in the transformative meaning of History/story, and he seeks to appropriate and internalize

the stories of the past in order to render them universally identifiable. Certainly, he is respectful of the dominant tradition, but he is also willing to go beyond the boundaries of dogmatic traditionalism and rebel against imposed censorship. Rūmī presents himself as above religious identities but also well-grounded in Islam and the Qurʾān. He is universal and local at the same time. In his own lifetime, this approach allowed him to appreciate the beauty of others and to welcome followers from all creeds. Rūmī’s mystical theology is an important source for the new Islamic theology of religious pluralism; it offers the spiritual and hermeneutical keys to overcome polemics and identitarian pride. Rūmī’s perspective may also prompt Christians to think about the centrality of Jesus Christ in universal terms, even where his name is not mentioned.

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Notes

- ¹ On the website www.tanzil.net (accessed on 2 January 2022), there are 18 translations of the Qurʾān in English and many in other languages. Comparing the translations of the verses (Q 4, 157–58) shows the variety of interpretations. In this article, the Qurʾānic quotations are taken from several translations, mainly (Itani 2012) and (Abdel Haleem 2004), with modifications if necessary. The letter Q indicates the Qurʾān; the first number indicates the sūra number; the second one shows the verse number (Ḥaḥḥ numeration).
- ² The Word of God in the Qurʾān is related to all levels of creation, revelation, and divine decrees: “Say, if the whole oceans were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted even if We were to add another ocean to it” (Q 18, 109), see also (Q 31, 27). At the same time, Jesus Christ is the unique person called a “Word of God”: The angels said, “Mary, God gives you news of a Word from Him, whose name will be the Christ Jesus son of Mary” (Q 3, 45), see also (Q 4, 171).
- ³ They attributed the “confusion” mentioned in (Q 4, 157–58) to Jesus’ empty tomb. They also considered that only the human nature of the Christ, *nāsūt*, was crucified (cf. Bausani 1982). For Modern Islamic debate (cf. Ayoub 2007, pp. 156–83).
- ⁴ Ḥallāğ was born in Tūr in Fars (modern Iran) and imprisoned and crucified in Bagdad for heresy. The work of Louis Massignon on his life and thought remains the primary study on the topic (Massignon 1975). We have access only to the poem’s French translation (Massignon 1969, vol. 2, pp. 157–60), as the Persian original, located in the third volume of *Uštūr Nāme*, is not published. It should be mentioned that the attribution of this work to ʿAṭṭār is arguable. A critical edition of the original with a new translation is planned in a forthcoming study. Dawlatšāh Samarqandī (d. 900/1494 circa) mentioned an encounter between ʿAṭṭār and Rūmī in Nīšāpūr when the latter was a child traveling with his father from Balḥ to Konya. In this account, ʿAṭṭār foresaw the Rūmī’s genius and gave the boy his book, the *Asrār Nama* (Samarqandī 2003, p. 193). Critical scholars doubt the veracity of the meeting; however, it shows the spiritual continuity between two major figures of Persian Sufism (Lewis 2003, pp. 64–65).
- ⁵ For Rūmī’s biography and works, see: (Aflākī 2002, pp. 55–421; Chittick 1983, pp. 1–10; Lewis 2003, pp. 271–419; Schimmel 1980, pp. 1–58; Schimmel 2001, pp. 11–33).
- ⁶ This article mainly uses Reynold A. Nicholson’s translation (Rūmī 1925–1940). Volumes I, III, and V are a critical edition of the original Persian text; II, IV, and VI, the English translation; VII and VIII, the translator’s commentary. This is the first English translation of the text and it still maintains its scholarly validity today. It has also been an essential reference for other translations, such as the Italian one (Rūmī 2006). I have compared and verified the translation with the Persian original, published by Nicholson, and with more recent Iranian editions (Rūmī 2020–2021), and adjustments to the translation are indicated in the footnotes. The transliteration of some words was modified to be adapted to be in line with the rest of the article. The letter M indicates Maṭnawī in Nicholson’s translation (Rūmī 1925–1940), followed by the first number indicating the book (out of six in total) and the numbers after the comma indicating the verse numbers according to Nicholson’s numbering.
- ⁷ Gabriele Mandel Khān, in the Italian translation, asserted erroneously that Rūmī was referring to the verse: “God would not punish them *while you are amongst them*,” (Q 8, 33), which refers to the Prophet Muḥammad and not Jesus.
- ⁸ (Q 5, 117) and a similar verse (Q 3, 55) have caused a great deal of debate among Qurʾānic commentators because they contradict the literalist understanding of (Q 4, 157–58). Al-Rāzī mentioned several opinions in this regard (Rāzī 1981, vol. 8, pp. 74–76, vol. 12, p. 144).
- ⁹ The Biblical translation used in this article is (Bible 1989).
- ¹⁰ Otto or attar is an essential oil from flowers, especially the damask rose.
- ¹¹ These verses can be seen as the conclusion to the long story of “Moses and the Shepherd” (M 2, 1720–1815), a text of theology of religions par excellence.

- 12 See for instance the influential commentary of the Mawlawī Šayḥ of the Galata lodge in Istanbul, Ismāʿīl Rusūḥ al-Dīn al-Anqarawī (d. 1631), also known as Rusūḥī, in seven volumes in Ottoman Turkish (Anqarawī 1872, vol. 2, pp. 309–10). See also Yūsuf b. Aḥmad al-Mawlawī (d. 1669), Šayḥ of the Mawlawī lodge of Beşiktaş on the Bosphorus, who wrote an Arabic translation and commentary mainly derived from Anqarawī's work (Mawlawī 1872, vol. 2, pp. 320–21). About the Maṭnawī's commentaries (cf. Lewis 2003, pp. 475–82).
- 13 Kalīla and Dimna are two jackals, the protagonists of the book bearing their names, written or rather translated by Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. 139/756–757 or 142/759–760). any editions (Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ 1984).
- 14 In Šīʿī tradition, the Ḥadīṯ of the Ark, *Ḥadīṯ al-safīna*, is considered a pillar of imamology and salvation doctrines, narrated in different versions: “Certainly, Ahl al-Bayt [the Prophet Muhammad's Family] are like the Ark of Noah, [and] saved whoever boarded” (Maḡlisī 1966, vol. 23, pp. 123–25).
- 15 Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya was the second Umayyad caliph (d. 64/683). He is the perpetrator of injustice in Ḥusayn's martyrdom, analogous to the role of Pontius Pilatus in the Crucifixion, as mentioned in the Nicene Creed.
- 16 It is similar to Jesus saying, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children (Lk 23, 28).
- 17 The death of Rūmī is called *šab-e ʿarūs*, and celebrated every year, joyously and serenely, on December 17 in his mausoleum in Konya. One might also compare this attitude towards death to the “Canticle of the Creatures” or “Canticle of Brother Sun” attributed to St. Francis, in which he mentions “our Sister Bodily Death” (Armstrong et al. 2000, pp. 113–14).
- 18 Abū al-Fayḍ Ṭwbān b. Ibrāhīm, known as Dū al-Nūn, born at Akhmīm, in Upper Egypt. He was sent to prison in Baghdad because of his Sufi teachings, then released by the Abbasid caliph Mutawakkil and returned to Egypt (Ebstein 2014).
- 19 Ġadīr Ḥumm is a pond on the caravan route between Mecca and Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad, returning from his farewell pilgrimage, proclaimed, “Anyone who has me as his *mawlā*, has ʿAlī as his *mawlā*.” This ḥadīṯ is fundamental to Šīʿī Imamology. It is also found in Sunni sources, but interpreted as an indication of ʿAlī's merit which does not necessarily imply a nomination for succession. See the encyclopedic work of ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn al-Amīnī (Amīnī [1966] 1995). See also (Amir-Moezzi 2014).
- 20 Nicholson, followed by other translators, translated the word *Masīḥ* with Messiah; instead, it is possible to translate it with “Christ.”
- 21 Referring to Jesus' miracle, Mt (14, 25–26), Mk (6, 48–49), Jn (6, 19).
- 22 This “Paschal” and inner interpretation of Christmas is well explained by Sulṭān Valad (d. 1318), Rūmī's son and spiritual heir: “When sorrow produces strong urges, the child comes quickly. At the time of Jesus' birth, peace be upon him, it is sorrow that brought Mary, peace be upon her, to the foot of the palm tree and made her give birth to the spirit of God. [. . .] If the divine pain dominates you and invades you continuously, this pain does not leave you time to take care of anything else. Certainly, from your Mary-like soul, Jesus who is the spirit of God will be born.” (Sulṭān Valad 1982, pp. 91–92). The English translation is mine. The question is not denying the reality of suffering but overcoming it by seeing the horizon of resurrection/birth.
- 23 Following the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923, the Greek Christians were forced to leave.
- 24 Mowlānā or Mawlānā means “our lord,” a famous honorific title of Rūmī. Omid Safi translates *khodā-sāz* as “God-maker” (Safi 2018, p. xxxii). ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Theyrānūs offered a lengthy explanation of his paradoxical and ironic answer, best captured by the phrase: “He conveyed me from the imitation of invoking God to the reality of knowing God.” (Aflākī 2002, p. 190). The idea of a “God-maker” is also not alien to Ibn ʿArabī's concept of God-created in belief (cf. Corbin 2012, pp. 209–14).

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