



**Rumi Day at Utrecht University
1 July 2022**

Rumi on Faith, Piety and Religious Philosophy

Academy Building,
Belle van Zuylen Hall
Domplein 29, Utrecht

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Friday 1 July 2022
From 13.00 to 18.00

Programme

13.00 **Alan Williams**

Discovered in Translation: What is Rumi really talking about in his Masnavi?

13.45 **Christian Lange**

Rumi on Transforming the Senses

14.30 **Maarten Holtzapffel**

Rumi and Religious Pluralism: Mystical Poetry in the Political Theories of Abdolkarim Soroush

15.15 Break

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15.30 **Rokus de Groot**

Rumi and Music: Bee Bade Mast (Drunk without Wine)

16.15 **Pooyan Tamimi Arab**

Can Muslims Drink? Rumi Vodka, Persianate Ideals, and the Anthropology of Islam

17.00 **Asghar Seyed-Gohrab**

The Garden of Sinners: Justification of Sin in Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ

Rumi on Faith, Piety and Religious Philosophy

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) is one of the mostly read authors in the Islamic world. He is a best-selling poet in the United States. Why is Rumi so appealing to people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds? What is his timeless message that attracts both Muslims and non-Muslims alike? Is his modern appreciation merely to do with his non-conformist and transgressive ideas? How are his transgressive ideas used as a counter to the violent ideas of Islamist ideology, emphasizing a different Islam?

Rumi composed an impressive amount of works, his poetry consists of about 120.000 lines. His *magnum opus*, the *Spiritual Poem (Masnavi-ye ma'navi)* is called the Koran in the Persian language as he comments on the Koran in an attractive fashion, adorning his message with metaphors and illustrative anecdotes. His opening lines about the complaint of a reed cut from the reedbed is a metaphor for the separated human soul, longing to return to the original home:

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Listen to this reed as it is grieving,
it tells the story of our separation:
'Since I was severed from the bed of reeds,
in my cry men and women have lamented.
I need the breast that's torn to shreds by parting,
to give expression to the pain of the heartache.
Whoever finds himself left far from home
looks forward to the day of his reunion.'

(*The Masnavi of Rumi*, translation by Alan Williams, London: I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2020, Vol. I, p. 5)

During this Rumi Day, organized as part of the ERC Advanced Grant *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*, scholars from different disciplines ranging from Islamic Studies, Ethnomusicology, Anthropology, to Persian Studies will deliver lectures on various aspects of Rumi and his religious philosophy.

Discovered in Translation:
What is Rumi really talking about in his Masnavi?
(Alan Williams)

Next year, on December 17th 2023, people will be celebrating the 750th anniversary of the life and death of Mawlāna Jalaluddīn Rūmī (1207-1273). Rumi wrote his greatest and longest work, the *Masnavī-ye Ma'navī* ('The Spiritual Couplets' or 'The Couplets of Meaning'), in the last few years of his life. Voluminous in length and profound in meaning, the *Masnavi* has always been a challenge to readers, though at first it appears to be merely a compendious book of stories. What is the real challenge? What does it actually mean?

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'What is Rumi *really* talking about in his *Masnavi*?' may seem to imply that an *essential* answer can be found. In fact, however, through the centuries, at the basic level, readers have responded to the *Masnavi* in many different ways: some with empathy, as devotee-disciples; some with scepticism or hostility, as critics or opponents of Sufism; and more recently there has been a 'free-for all', as Rumi became a Number One Best-seller internationally and thus a 'popular poet'. I shall reflect on how Rumi's *Masnavi* has been received in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds to the present day, and whether 'we' in the 21st century, can really understand what he was writing about three-quarters of a millennium ago in a very different, medieval, pre-technological world. A central idea in my thinking is that 'we' (the 13th and the 21st Century 'we') are *always* reading the *Masnavi* in translation – even if we know the Persian language and we have the original manuscripts in front of us. The key thing is that Rumi himself, from the start, was *writing to translate*: he was translating from his inner experience of realities (Arabic /Persian *haqā'iq*) of the world of 'meaning' (Arabic *ma'na*) into the outer language of forms and symbols, stories and discourses. What does that mean in view of the manifold responses to the *Masnavi* over the centuries?

I maintain that Rumi's own position is that, while he is certainly aware of his own human subjectivity, he is also conscious of being in receipt of the divine dispensation of the *Masnavi* that was inspired in him. Therefore, he is obliged – even commanded – to convey this dispensation to us by writing down the *Masnavi* as he translates his understanding of it from the spiritual world into verses. For Rumi too, then, his writing is discovering, and uncovering, that is *revealing* not losing, in his act of translating it from the spiritual world.

Like other academic translators of the 20th and 21st century, I am going to great lengths to try to balance, on the one hand, the multiplicity of views of Rumi in the postmodern world with, on the other hand, the essentialist position of religious mystics, for whom an absolute Truth is a dialogue with divine realities. The talk will be accompanied by readings from the original Persian text and my own translations of the *Masnavi*.

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Alan Williams is Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester. He has published many books and articles on ancient, medieval and modern literature, history of religions and translation studies, both in Iranian studies and in the comparative study of religion and literature. Having been funded by a British Academy Wolfson Foundation and the Leverhulme Trust, he is currently engaged in publishing all six volumes of Rumi's *Masnavi* for IB Tauris / Bloomsbury, in English metrical translations and commentary, along with the accompanying Persian text.

[https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/researchers/alan-williams\(9249cd21-9e83-4578-92a4-07f4a29bce05\)/projects.html?period=running](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/researchers/alan-williams(9249cd21-9e83-4578-92a4-07f4a29bce05)/projects.html?period=running)

Rumi on Transforming the Senses
(Christian Lange)

This paper traces Rumi’s developing ideas about the five senses of the human body. On the one hand, there are plenty of passages in the *Mathnavi* and other writings by Rumi that suggest that the senses are deficient and deceptive, and that true knowledge only comes from the heart, not the eyes and the other sensory organs. On the other hand, in other passages, Rumi extols the potential of the senses to provide access to the truth — if they are purified or, as Rumi puts it, used as “golden senses” instead of “copper senses”. Is this higher level of sensation, this paper asks, merely the result of renouncing the outer senses and relying exclusively on the inner, spiritual senses? Or is Rumi suggesting that the outer senses can provide insights into higher truths, if only they are *transformed* and put to use in the correct way? If so, how does one achieve such a transformation of the senses? Did Rumi himself believe to have undergone this sensory revolution, or did he credit others with having done so? As biographers of Rumi know, a hiatus occurred between the composition of Book 1 and Book 2 of the *Mathnavi* “An interval was needed in order that the blood might turn to milk,” Rumi says at the beginning of Book 2. Should we see this hiatus as the moment in which Rumi’s own sensorium was transformed?

Christian Lange (PhD Harvard, 2006) is Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Utrecht University. Before moving to Utrecht, he studied at the universities of Tübingen (Germany), Cairo (Egypt), Paris-EHESS (France), and Harvard (U.S.) and was a lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh from 2007 to 2011 (U.K.). His research focuses on the history of premodern Islamic law and theology, in particular criminal law and doctrines and practices related to the Muslim afterlife. He is the author of *Justice, punishment and the medieval Muslim imagination* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008) as well as *Paradise and hell in Islamic traditions* 2016 (CUP, 2017)

and most recently, *Mohammed* (Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2017). In addition, Lange is the editor of a collection of articles on the Islamic hell, entitled *Locating hell in Islamic traditions* (Brill, 2016), as well as several other edited volumes. Since 2017, he's the Principal Investigator of an ERC Consolidator Grant project called "SENSIS: The senses of Islam" (<https://sensis.sites.uu.nl/>). He's a member of the Netherlands Royal Academy of Sciences and the Director of the national Dutch graduate school of Islamic Studies, NISIS.



*Rumi and Religious Pluralism: Mystical Poetry in the
Political Theories of Abdolkarim Soroush*
(Maarten Holtzapffel)

One of the reasons I developed an interest for Persian poetry is due to the vitality of classical Persian poetry in contemporary Iran, where lines of such poetry are used by people from all walks of life to convey personal feelings and to comment on socio-political events. In my presentation, I will look at the reception of one of the proponents of the classical Persian tradition, the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), in particular in the theories of the Iranian political philosopher and theologian Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945). Soroush frequently incorporates lines of classical Persian poetry into his arguments, and considers Rumi as his spiritual and intellectual guide. Although Soroush can be considered one of the most prominent theoreticians of the Islamic government in the 1980's, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 he emerged as a leading reformist intellectual and critic of the clerical government. After the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the appointment of Ayatollah Khamenei (1989) as the new Supreme Leader, Soroush evolved into one of the leading figures of a reform movement that argued for the de-ideologization of Islam, the re-evaluation of clerical authority in politics and the need for the establishment of a democracy based on the acknowledgment of religious pluralism.

In this presentation, I will look at one story from Rumi's *Masnavi*. The story of Moses and the Shepherd, that Soroush incorporates in his arguments for acknowledging religious pluralism, which according to Soroush is the foundation of a religious democracy. I will examine the way how Soroush relocates these lines of poetry from a medieval Sufi context into a twentieth-century discussion about religious pluralism and the need for a religious democracy in Iran.

Maarten Holtzapffel is a PhD candidate for the ERC-Advanced Grant *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*, working on the project *Of Love and Wisdom: Rūmī's Transgressive Ideas and the Rise of Humanism*. In this project, he investigates Rumi's reception in the modern world, examining how the antinomian ideas expressed in his poetry are interpreted as a humanist philosophy, transcending religious boundaries. For his Research Master thesis, Maarten conducted a study on the appropriation of Rumi's mystic poetry in contemporary Iranian politics, in particular by the political philosopher and theologian Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945).



Rumi and Music: Bee Bade Mast (Drunk without Wine)
(Rokus de Groot)

The question whether the practice of music and dance is admissible, has been the subject of dispute in the world of Islam up to the present day. In Rumi's verses, involvement in music does not seem a matter of personal choice or legal dispute, but of a compelling drive:

Without a frame drum don't come to us, for we are in festivity.

Get up and play the drum, for we are victorious.
We are drunk, but not drunk from the wine of grapes;
Of any thoughts you have, we are far.
(*Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, transl. after S.T. Shiva)

Rumi shows awareness of the transgressive potential of the musical experience in relation to the boundaries of the individual, especially in the context of *sama'*, the ceremony of music and dance celebrating the meeting into union with the Divine beloved.

He speaks from his own experience. After meeting his beloved Shamsuddin of Tabriz, his life is transformed, which finds its spontaneous expression in poetry and music:

In my hand was always the Koran –
Now [after meeting Shams] I seized the *cheghana* [bowed string instrument] out of love –
In my mouth were always the words of laud –
Now it is poetry and quatrains and songs...
(*Divân-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, transl. A. Schimmel)

In fact, to Rumi, musical expression shows the responsibility – the ability to respond – of human beings to the Divine. Not to respond would be a disgrace.

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In this presentation I will investigate the transgressive and transformative power of music, leading to a drunkenness of love, as reported by Rumi in verses which sound like music:

Today it is sama' and it is sama' and sama'
It is light and it is illumination and it is illumination and illumination
This love, it is unifying and it is unifying, unifying
Of intellect it is bidding farewell and it is bidding farewell and farewell."
(*Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, transl. S.T. Shiva)

Rokus de Groot is emeritus Professor of Musicology and a composer. He conducts research on music of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially about aesthetics and systems of composition, about the interaction between different cultural and religious traditions, and about musical concepts as a metaphor (polyphony,

counterpoint). He had a personal chair “Music in the Netherlands since 1600” at the University of Utrecht from 1994 to 2000, and was the Chair and Professor of Musicology at the University of Amsterdam from 2000 to 2012. In 2009, he was invited to deliver the Edward Said Memorial Lecture at the American University in Cairo. As a composer he works with musicians, singers and dancers from different cultural backgrounds on projects of mutual learning and intercultural polyphony. Among his works are the dance composition *Song of Songs: The Love and Life of Mirabai*, relating the biblical book to South-Indian bharata natyam (New Delhi 2005), the opera *Layla and Majnun, A Composition about the Night* (Amsterdam, 2006), based on Persian, Turkish, Arabic and Spanish texts (Nezami, Rumi, Juan de la Cruz), ShivaShakti for English horn and sarangi (Chennai, 2009) and Hosgeldin (Ankara and Burdur, 2014, 2015), dedicated to Lake Burdur in Anatolia, in a project to prevent that lake from drying out. Among his publications that reflect on the mystical path, is: “Rumi and the Abyss of Longing,” in *Mawlana Rumi Review*, Vol. II, (2011), 61-93.

Can Muslims Drink?
Rumi Vodka, Persianate Ideals,
and the Anthropology of Islam
(Pooyan Tamimi Arab)

Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016) challenges Islamic Studies scholars, (art) historians, and anthropologists to reconsider theoretical frameworks underpinning historical and ethnographic research. This article addresses Ahmed's concerns that studies of Islam often conceptually privilege orthodoxy, by including drinking and intoxication as worthy of close attention in examining the history and the anthropology of Islam. The case of Wine Shop the Philosopher, run by a former Afghan refugee in The Hague and Amsterdam, is presented after establishing the comparative and interdisciplinary relevance of alcohol consumption in studies of Islam and Muslims. Ahmed's conceptual framework is used and assessed in comparison with the wine shops' contemporary pluralist reality by exploring the idealized boundaries of Persianate culture and Islam in dialogues between Persian-speaking interlocutors. It is argued that alcoholic drinks lend themselves to competing gastro-nationalisms and prompt ethnolinguistic tensions between and within groups with Turkish, Moroccan, Iranian, and Afghan backgrounds in the Netherlands. The focus on diverse, coexisting and clashing drink regimes, in conclusion, allows us to deconstruct dichotomies between sober Muslims and European drinkers, African and Asian believers and European unbelievers, and refugees and citizens.

Pooyan Tamimi Arab is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University and a member of the Young Academy of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the author of *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape* (Bloomsbury, 2017), a case study of political secularism in the Netherlands, and *Why Do Religious Forms Matter?* (Palgrave, 2022), about the role of material

religion in the political philosophies of Spinoza, Locke, and Rawls. Tamimi Arab is also the secretary of GAMAAN, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran, and a board member of the Amsterdam Spinoza Circle.

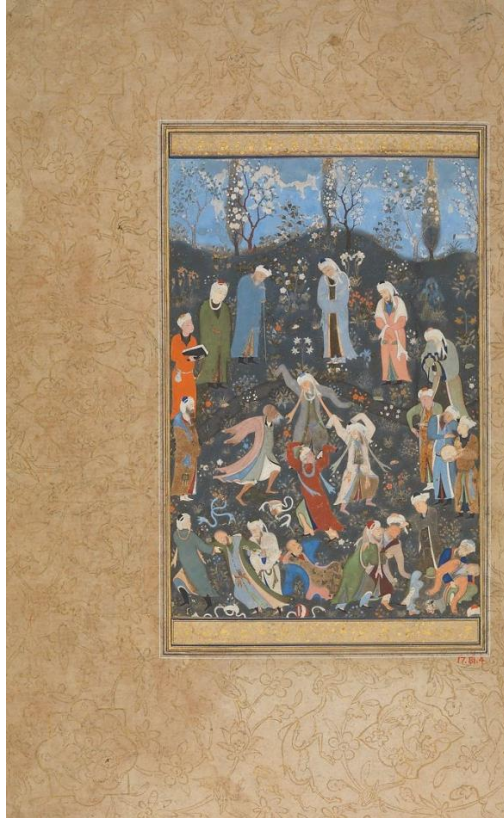


The Garden of Sinners
Justification of Sin in Rūmī and Ḥāfīz
(Asghar Seyed-Gohrab)

In this paper I shall discuss the notion of sin in the writings of Rūmī and Ḥāfīz, investigating how Persian mystical poets view sin. Which deeds and comportments are interpreted as sinful and what does a sinful life imply? Why is sin prominent in Persian mystical poetry? Why do theologians attack certain mystic communities for using their high spiritual status as an argument for disobeying Sharia law? Through several examples I shall demonstrate how the concept of ‘sin’ is defined and how poets such as Ḥāfīz problematize sin. In his mystico-didactic masterpiece, *Mathnavī-yi ma‘navī*, Rūmī advises his audience to live a pious life and to obey God, and emphasizes the importance of repentance, but in other places in his *oeuvre* he radically rejects both obedience and disobedience to God, emphasizing transcendental Love.

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Asghar Seyed-Gohrab is Professor of Persian and Iranian Studies at Utrecht University in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies. He has published extensively on Persian literature, mysticism and religion. His publications range from Persian poetry to Sufism and the role of religious and mystical motifs and metaphors in Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and how peaceful religious injunctions are used to justify violence. He authored *Soefisme: een levende traditie*, (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2015 third print); *The True Dream: Indictment of the Shiite Clerics of Isfahan*, (London: Routledge, 2017, with S. McGlenn). “Rūmī’s Antinomian Poetic Philosophy,” in *Mawlana Rumi Review*, IX, No. 1-2, (2018),159-99. His recent publication is *Martyrdom, Mysticism and Dissent: The Poetry of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2021). At the moment he is the Principal Investigator (PI) of an ERC-Advanced Grant entitled *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam* (www.beyondsharia.nl), examining Islamic non-conformist movements.



The image depicts “Dancing Dervishes”, Folio from a Divan of Hafiz (ca. 1325–1390) **Artist:** Painting attributed to Bihzad (Iranian, Herat ca. 1450–1535/36 Herat) **Date:** ca. 1480;
Geography: Attributed to present-day Afghanistan, Herat;
Medium: Opaque watercolor and gold on paper [Hafiz | "Dancing Dervishes", Folio from a Divan of Hafiz | The Metropolitan Museum of Art \(metmuseum.org\)](#)