

# ISLAM AND AMERICA

## Poetic Connections

**Eboo Patel**

One of the best-selling poets in America is a 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim named Jelaluddin Rumi. His words are read aloud at open-mike poetry nights and invoked at wedding ceremonies. Mainstream bookstores carry well over a dozen books of his poems and stories. And the *New York Times* recently declared Rumi the most influential poet in America since the 1960s.

Rumi's popularity is all the more remarkable given the suspicions between America and the Muslim world. Much ink has been spilled detailing the differences between the two entities, ranging from dress codes to dating patterns to diets. Serious scholars have made their careers by suggesting that the two are incompatible.

The chasm feels wider because America and the Muslim world each insist on viewing the other through its own cultural lens. What Americans cherish as freedom, the Muslim world views as tending towards debauchery. What many Muslims consider pious restraint, Americans see as evidence of control by a misogynist theocracy.

Amidst these tensions, Americans from all walks of life are reading Rumi. If the Muslim world and America are so seemingly incomprehensible to each other, how has a medieval dervish from the East nestled so close to America's heart?

## Rumi's Life

Born in 1207 in Central Asia, Rumi trained as a Muslim legal scholar with leading figures in Aleppo and Damascus. He settled in Konya, located in present-day Turkey, and began making a name for himself as a professor and preacher.

The defining moment in Rumi's life came in 1244, when he met the itinerant Muslim mystic Shams. There are many mythologized tellings of their encounter. My favorite is the one where Shams, dressed in rags, interrupts a lecture Rumi is giving on Muslim law, points to his legal books, and says 'What are these?'

'You wouldn't understand,' responds Rumi derisively.

With a wave of his hand, Shams sets the books on fire.

Shocked, Rumi asks, 'What was that?'

'You wouldn't understand,' says Shams, and disappears.

In this flash of magic, Rumi understood that he needed to turn his attention away from lecturing on Muslim law and towards sufism, the path of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes the spiritual over the material. Shams became Rumi's companion and mentor on the sufi path. The two engaged in what sufis call "sohbet", conversations on cosmic matters. Rumi's poetry was sparked by their friendship.

## Rumi's Writing

The defining characteristic of Rumi's work is a conviction that holiness is everywhere, and a longing to be connected with it.

He felt this connection in random encounters: "In any chance meeting / on the street, there is a shine, / an elegance rising-up."

He perceived "the shine" within himself: "I am all orders of being, / the circling galaxy, / the evolutionary intelligence, / the lift, and the falling away. / What is, and what isn't."

He heard it in music: "I want the reed flute / and the harp, the rebab and drum, . . . / music is my *zikr*" (way of remembering God).

Perhaps most striking of all was Rumi's ability to link heaven and earth in his consciousness, and to see the source behind both: "I belong to the beloved, have seen the two / worlds as one and that one call to and know."

Islam was at the root and center of Rumi's work. Seeking the favor of God and praising the Prophet Muhammad are significant themes in his poetry. It

was Rumi's Muslim eyes that perceived the pervasiveness of God (what Muslims call Tawhid), and his Muslim heart that yearned to be one with it.

And it was his Muslim ecumenism, grounded in the Qur'anic scriptures stating God has sent many messengers to humankind, that recognized that other cultures and voices are "full of pearls" too: "Hindus praise (God) in the Hindu tongue / Sindis praise (God) in the Sindi tongue."

### **An American Rumi**

What is it about Rumi that attracts so many Americans? Some say it is our enchantment with the exotic, or our current affair with "New Age" spirituality. I think there is something deeper going on.

My belief is that Rumi strikes a chord in America because he reminds us of a poet at the center of our own tradition, Walt Whitman.

Like Rumi, Whitman saw the transcendent expressed in humanity: "Each of us inevitable, / Each of us limitless . . . / Each of us here as divinely as any is here."

Like Rumi, Whitman sought connection with everywhere: "What cities the light or warmth penetrates I penetrate those cities / myself, / All islands to which birds wing their way I wing my way / myself."

Like Rumi, Whitman loved the different voices of the world: "I hear the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque, . . . / I hear the Christian priests at the altars of their churches, / I hear the Hebrew reading his records and psalms, . . . / I hear the Hind(u) teaching his favorite pupil."

As Rumi wrote out of the Muslim tradition, Whitman was rooted in the American one. He once said, "I know very well that my 'Leaves (of Grass)' could not possibly have emerged or been fashion'd completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any other land than democratic America."

### **Whitman and Rumi, Islam and America**

Had they been aware of one another's work (and who knows, in some other dimension they may be engaged in *sohbet!*), Whitman might consider Rumi a kindred American transcendentalist, and Rumi would be forgiven for thinking Whitman had a sufi soul.

What might the similarities between Rumi and Whitman signify? First, poetry can express both the uniqueness of a tradition and give glimpses into matters universally human. This ability to articulate particularity while highlighting commonality makes poetry an excellent medium for dialogue between

two traditions. And in a world where differences are so often the cause for killing, finding ways to dialogue is a necessity not a luxury.

Second, the similarities between Rumi and Whitman show us that Islam and America, despite their differences, do not inevitably have to be at odds. The poets have pointed out surprising affinities between the spirits of the two civilizations.

As a Muslim and an American, I have been nurtured by both traditions. And there is no clash of civilizations in my soul.