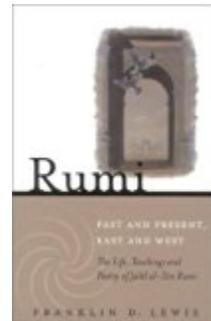


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Franklin D. Lewis. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Oxford and New York: Oneworld Publications, 2001. xvii + 686 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85168-214-0.

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## A Rumi for All Seasons

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This work of almost seven hundred pages represents a heroic effort to set before readers, both specialist and non-specialist, the current state of our knowledge of the great mystical poet Rumi (d. 672/1273). The timeframe for the study extends from Rumi's immediate predecessors of the late twelfth century up to the present day. The approach is literary, but does not neglect the historical milieu. The latter point is especially important in light of the modern success of Rumi in the Western world. Far too often Rumi has been yanked out of his linguistic and religious milieu by Westerners in search of a syncretic "New Age" spirituality. Lewis makes great effort to reconstruct this milieu and to situate Rumi fully within his Islamic context. However, this is not to say that Lewis minimizes Rumi's modern reception. He devotes a good number of pages to the commentators—Turkish, Farsi, and Arabic speaking—who have kept Rumi's poetry alive, and to Rumi's entry into Western literary and spiritual consciousness. The writing is accessible and, at times, even playful. The book is divided into five sections. The first, "Rumi's Fathers in Spirit," is historical in nature and includes chapters on Rumi's father, Baha al-Din Valad (d. 628/1231), Borhan al-Din Mohaqeq, and Shams al-Din Tabrizi, all of whom exerted their own influence on Rumi. The second section, "Rumi's Children and Brethren in Spirit," treats the successors of Rumi, in particular his son Sultan Valad (712/1312), and discusses the biographical/hagiographical tradition associated with Rumi himself, with the emphasis on Sepahsalar and al-Aflaki. Sec-

tion three takes up "Texts and Teachings." Here Lewis's literary approach shines. The recap of a Rumi biography, tied into the interplay between reading/recitation and poetry, works well. Fittingly, Lewis follows with a good dose of the real thing, offering his own translation of fifty poems, ghazals, and quatrains. The "Teachings" chapter of this section explores the mystical doctrine behind the poetics. In this brief discussion such typically sufi themes as esoteric understanding, saints and shaykhs, the *qotb*, and the unity of being are taken up. Section 4 describes the sufi order, known as the Mevleviye (in Arabic, Mawlawiyya), beginning with the organization around Rumi's shrine in Konya. A second chapter in this section traces the poet's literary inheritance through the Muslim world. Here commentaries on his "Masnavi" from mystics and philosophers such as Molla Sadra, Sari 'Abd Allah Efendi, and Molla Hadi Sabzevari, among others, are highlighted. The influence of Rumi on modern thinkers such as Shebli No'mani and Muhammad Iqbal is also discussed. Lewis also examines the relevance of the poet to the intellectual milieu of revolutionary Iran, as developed by Abdol Karim Soroush.

The last section, made up of five chapters, surveys the spread of Rumi beyond the studies devoted to him in Turkish, Arabic, and Persian, and into the West. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of academic treatments in European languages is surveyed and a thorough account of Western translations is provided. Here the very popular "translations" by Coleman Barks are discussed. Barks, following the poet Robert Bly,

and working largely from the earlier scholarly translations of Nicholson and Arberry, (re)produces a Rumi who fits well into the contemporary American poetry scene. The final chapter surveys Rumi on the Internet and the modern adaptations of his poetry in music, dance, and painting. Beyond the printed text there is also a related website set up through the publisher, Oneworld, which presents a number of images (Mevlevi tombs, shrines, mosques), notices of recent publications and artistic events, links to related websites, and a list of errata.

Lewis is to be commended for his thoroughness; the book will certainly function for years to come as the work of reference for Islamicists and students of comparative literature and religion. The website is promising, but for it to become a hub of serious "Rumi studies" more work will need to be done. No bibliography is provided, although the index does note titles under each author's name. Lewis argues that his detailed description of the literature makes a separate bibliography unnecessary (p. 8), but I would suggest he put one on the website. Seeing a full list of Rumi's works (particularly the numerous translations) along with the secondary literature, all in one place, would be helpful for students and newcomers to the field.

Although Lewis's approach is largely descriptive, with few new insights presented for specialists in the field, the strength of the work is in its comprehensiveness and its scope. This said, some notes on content may be made. In the introduction, Lewis mistakenly signals the presence of Shi'ism among the Egyptian population under Fatimid rule (p. 12). In fact doctrinal Fatimid Shi'ism never moved beyond the ruling class in any meaningful way. Elsewhere in the introduction, mention is made of Ghazzali's conversion to the spiritual path as

if it were an indisputable historical fact (p. 23). The contrast of "Sufism and orthodoxy" here is also problematic. Further along, the explanation of *zavie* should include its early indication as a teaching corner of a mosque (p. 27). The discussion of "Teachings" in chapter 9 is rather short. Although the book is perhaps already too long, a more detailed treatment of doctrine (both philosophical and mystical) would allow students more openings for comparison of Rumi with other Muslim thinkers. (This said, Lewis does note that a systematic study of this aspect of Rumi has yet to be written [p. 400].) A case in point would be the reference to *'aql-e koll* or Universal Intellect (p. 402), which deserves a footnote situating it in wider Neoplatonic thought. For the same reason, the treatment of "Unity of Being" (p. 414) should be tied in with the school of Ibn 'Arabi, if only in a footnote. The use of "Friend" in one translation (p. 409) is at odds with "saint" elsewhere in the same subsection. The label of "Shi'ite" applied to Divane Mohammad Chelebi and Yusof-e Sinechak seems too hasty (pp. 446-447). Yes, they do seem to have adopted various forms of typically Shi'ite veneration, but it should not be assumed that doctrinally they considered themselves Shi'ites. The line between Shi'ism and Sunnism, especially in a context colored by Hurufism and Malamatism, is often unclear. Chelebi and Sinechak may have held some properly Shi'ite doctrines, but no evidence to that effect is provided here. A final point has to do with transliteration. Lewis notes the difficulty of writing in English terms and names from Turkish, Persian, and Arabic (p. xvi). His simplified transliteration system, usually leaning toward Persian pronunciation, is welcome; however, in certain instances supplying an additional transliteration in standard Arabic would be helpful. Newer students of Islamic studies, when faced with *Omm al-ketab* (p. 11), *zavie* (p. 27), or *zeker* (p. 464) might not identify them with their Arabic originals *Umm al-kitab*, *zawiya*, and *dhikr*.

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