

An Islamic Language of Toleration

Rumi's Criticism of Religious Persecution

Cyrus Masroori

California State University San Marcos

Persian Sufi and poet Muhammad Jalal al-Din Balkhi, 1207–73 (also known as Rumi) presents one of the most extensive and vigorous Islamic theories of toleration.¹ This article examines Rumi's theory by placing it in its historical context, and examining its various arguments. It suggests that toleration, not only as a policy but also as a language, preceded liberalism. It also provides evidence that Rumi's defense is by far more inclusive than most early modern theories of toleration.

Keywords: *religion and politics; politics and history; political thought; philosophy*

Muhammad Jalal al-Din Balkhi, widely known as Rumi in the West, has acquired extensive recognition, mainly for his spiritual teachings.² This article examines a number of arguments presented by him in defense of toleration.³ The article places these arguments in the context of medieval Persian toleration discourse, and compares them with those advanced by some Western defenders of toleration.

Rumi's extensive and inclusive defense of toleration is important in a number of ways. For centuries, Rumi has been one of the most celebrated poets in the Persian-speaking world, which at one point extended from India to the borders of Greece. In addition to his intellectual and academic impact, no other Persian poet has had the same influence over the Persian folkloric literature, and many concepts in Rumi's writings have found their way into Persian axioms used in daily conversations. In addition, for a number of years, Rumi has exercised an influence in the West unmatched by any other Muslim author. At a time of suspicion and distrust, a person who can speak to both Muslims and the West is of great value.

This value is further appreciated when one realizes that Rumi provides the most extensive defense of toleration in Persian, and was undoubtedly one of the most vocal advocates of toleration in the medieval Muslim world. We must recall that this was a period of intense confrontation between the Muslims and Christians, resulting from the Crusades and the Muslims' invasion of Asia Minor. Consequently, many Muslim authors appealed to interpretations of the Quran that sanctioned discrimination against and even persecution of Christians.⁴

The primary and even exclusive concern of many medieval Muslim defenders of toleration was only various Muslim denominations and sects, and not non-Muslims. Given the extent and intensity of conflicts between Shi'i groups, such as Isma'ilis on one hand and various Sunnis on the other, and even among different Sunni schools, this concern is understandable. Thus, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who wrote one of the most extensive apologies of toleration, was exclusively concerned with convincing his readers that adherents to various Islamic denominations should be tolerated. Al-Ghazali argues that diversity of interpretations and at least in part the failure to apply the correct methods of interpretation to the Quran and *hadith* have led to divisions in Islam. Thus, he argued, adherents to these denominations are at most subject to error but not sin.

Al-Ghazali is clear that toleration should not be extended to people who deny the basic principles of Islam, such as the unity of God and the Day of Resurrection. Nor should those who accuse the Prophet Muhammad of lying be tolerated, even if they argue that the lie was to benefit the society, or be immune from persecution. Furthermore, al-Ghazali argues that should interpretive activities lead to "confusing the minds of the masses," then those responsible should be persecuted for "unsanctioned innovation" (Jackson 2002, 109). Unlike al-Ghazali, Rumi defends toleration of both Muslims and

Cyrus Masroori, Associate Professor of Political Science, California State University, San Marcos; e-mail: cmasroor@csusm.edu.

non-Muslims, and encourages freedom of inquiry and interpretation.

For political theorists and historians of political thought, meanwhile, Rumi's writings on toleration have further value. First, they provide evidence against suggestions that toleration is exclusively a liberal or a Western theory or practice.⁵ In recent years, the conceptual confusion and historical deficiency behind such suggestions have been, to some extent, exposed (Laursen 1999; Laursen and Nederman 1998; Nederman 2000; Walzer 1997; Bejczy 1997). However, there is still a need to provide further evidence that toleration, as both a policy and a doctrine, is not exclusively Western. Such an effort is particularly urgent when Islamic societies are concerned, since there is a false but seemingly widespread perception that Islam has little to offer in support of toleration, and that Islamic communities are inherently incapable of or too immature to practice tolerance.⁶ Studying Rumi's defense of toleration can help us avoid making such careless and historically inaccurate conclusions.

Defending the proposition that Islam is capable of providing a theoretical framework for toleration could be based on a legalistic approach to Quranic verses that stipulate interaction with non-Muslims. Verses such as 2:62, 2:256, 5:48, 11:118, and 109:6 have been frequently presented as grounds for toleration in Islam. But, at the same time, other verses, like 3:118, 9:5, 9:29, and 21:109, appear to call for persecution of non-Muslims. Some may even suggest that the above discrepancy is evidence of Islam's pragmatic approach to toleration: the Quran calls Muslims to tolerance when they are weaker than non-Muslims, but otherwise it encourages them to persecute. Rumi invites us to observe the potential of Islam for toleration beyond the legalistic and contractual language of the Quran, and beyond an exclusively pragmatic interpretation of that language.

The value of studying Rumi's language of toleration goes beyond examining Islam's theoretical capacity for tolerance. John Christian Laursen and Cary Nederman, for example, point out that the association of toleration with the Enlightenment has led to the criticism that "tolerance is no more than yet another ideology, and too narrowly Western, classist, and sexist at that" (Laursen and Nederman 1998, 2). Their response to this criticism is to "show ideas and practices of tolerance and toleration were available and in use long before the Enlightenment" (Laursen and Nederman 1998, 2). Laursen and Nederman are also wary of "the general impression that toleration went

hand-in-hand with secularization" (Laursen and Nederman 1998, 5; Laursen 2003). Rumi provides us with strong evidence that some ideas of tolerance were launched (a) "long before the Enlightenment," (b) outside the West, and (c) by a deeply religious person.

Second, Rumi's promotion of toleration has a number of important attributes: to begin with, it is remarkably broad and inclusive. Some early modern liberals in Europe refused to tolerate all Christians, but centuries earlier, Rumi opposed persecution regardless of religious affiliation. Next, many defenders of toleration have appealed to the pragmatic and utilitarian value of toleration.⁷ Here, toleration is justified not based on its intrinsic value but for "the sake of some other human good." Alternatively, persecution is condemned because it could lead to such undesired outcomes as war and economic deterioration. There has also been a variant of this "utilitarian" approach that has defended toleration for the sake of creating and sustaining a medium where rational debate and investigation—at least potentially—can lead to discovery of sacred truth. Rumi, meanwhile, defends toleration for its intrinsic value, and regardless of its utilitarian benefits.

Rumi's Life and Time

Any serious attempt to evaluate Rumi's language of toleration demands examining it within its material and linguistic context. As Quentin Skinner explains, to understand a text or a political language (or ideology, as he often calls it), we need to know the political life that sets "the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate" (Skinner 1978, xi). We particularly need to pay attention to "the intellectual context in which the major texts were conceived—the context of earlier writings and inherited assumptions about political society" (Skinner 1978, xi). Through an account of Rumi's life, I hope to provide some, albeit quite limited, context for understanding Rumi's language of toleration.

Rumi was born either in Balkh (Afghanistan) or Vakhsh (Tajikistan).⁸ His father, Baha al-Din (d. 1231), was a preacher and teacher of Islamic law, with Sufi (Gnostic) inclinations, in Khorasan. By around 1215, Baha al-Din moved his family, and eventually chose Konya in today's Turkey for residence. Two explanations for this long journey have been presented.

Based on one account, Baha al-Din's Sufi leanings put him on a collision course with Fakhr al-Din Razi (1149-1209), arguably the most learned theologian of the period. Razi enjoyed the respect and support of the ruler of Khorasan (which at the time included parts of Afghanistan and Tajikistan), Muhammad Kharazmshah. Fearing the harm that the prince could do to him and his family, Baha al-Din decided to leave his ancestral residence.

This story is supported by many hagiographical accounts, and the conflict between Sufis and theologians can be traced back long before Rumi's time. Indeed, around the time of Baha al-Din's departure from Khorasan, Majd al-Din al-Baghdadi, an eminent Kobrai Sufi, was executed by Mohammad Kharazmshah's order (1219). Finally, there are some suggestions that Kharazmshah was uncompromising in his religious orthodoxy, which could have potentially worried Sufis like Baha al-Din.

The above account of Baha al-Din's motive for leaving Khorasan has been questioned by many contemporary scholars, who have pointed out that Baha al-Din's departure took place long after Razi's death, and that unlike al-Baghdadi, Baha al-Din was not of the stature to present any significant challenge to Razi or Kharazmshah. Instead, it is suggested that Baha al-Din probably left Khorasan in anticipation of the Mongol invasion, as did some other contemporary Sufis, like Najm al-Din Abubakr Razi.

Even prior to the Mongols' arrival, Khorasan witnessed widespread war and destruction, as various Turkic tribes fought each other brutally to control the area. Rumi and his family witnessed at least one such brutality when Kharazmshah's forces besieged the city of Samarqand around 1210. By one account, ten thousand people were massacred when the city fell (Jovaini 1999, 266), and Rumi (then about six years old and in Samarqand) remembered many years later how numerous residents were taken as slaves (Rumi 2000, 173). Thus the fear of the Mongols' imminent invasion and the general turmoil in Khorasan appear to be the more plausible reason for Baha al-Din's immigration. Kharazmshah's negative attitude toward Sufis could have also encouraged the move.

At the time of Baha al-Din's arrival, Konya was ruled by the Saljuq princes, who had conquered the area from the Byzantines. It appears that Baha al-Din was received with respect in Konya, where the Prince, Sultan 'Ala al-Din Kayqobad, installed him as the principle teacher of one of the city's religious colleges. Baha al-Din soon attracted a number of followers and devotees, although the hagiographical

accounts of his popularity appear to be highly exaggerated. Baha al-Din died in 1231, and Rumi, then twenty-four years old, inherited his father's teaching position. Soon after his father's death, Rumi traveled to Syria to study Islamic law. He was also further instructed in Islamic mysticism by one of his father's devotees, Borhan al-Din Mohaqqueq. Upon return to Konya, Rumi resumed teaching, and was also recognized as an Islamic jurist.

The turning point in Rumi's life was his meeting with Shams al-Din Tabrizi (1244). Shams converted Rumi from an Orthodox Sufi to a Rejoicing one. Orthodox Sufis believed in the austere following of religious edicts and obligations as prescribed by the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. They believed exact obedience to be essential to salvation. Meanwhile, Rejoicing Sufis sometimes argued that literal following of Quranic obligations was only for the masses, who had not achieved the spiritual awareness of the real Sufis. They believed in reaching Allah through spiritual awakening. Among means to such awakenings were playing music, singing, and ritual (ecstatic) dancing, behaviors frequently and strongly condemned by the Orthodox.

It is not difficult to see the ramifications of each of these positions with respect to toleration.⁹ A number of Orthodox Sufis, for instance, actively participated in jihad, whether against the crusaders or invading Byzantine territories. An early example of these Sufis was highly celebrated Ibrahim Adham (ninth century). Another early figure, Shaykh Abu Ashaq Kazeruni, not only participated in jihad against Christians, but also sought persecution of Zoroastrians (Zarrinkub 1990, 218). The intolerance practiced by Orthodox Sufis was not limited to non-Muslims. Upon hearing philosophical concepts in the sermons of a Muslim preacher, one of the most celebrated Orthodox Sufis, Khajeh Abdullah Ansari (1006–88), provoked his followers to attack the preacher's house and burn it down (Zarrinkub 1990, 73). Another Sufi leader, Sheikh Ahmad Jam, was famous for his use of brutality in enforcing Islamic law, and his hostility toward Isma'ili Shi'is (Tadayun n.d., 247).

In sharp contrast to the Orthodox, the Rejoicing Sufis present a tradition of toleration. Thus, Bayzid Bastami (804–74), a famous Rejoicing Sufi, was remarkably kind to the followers of other religions. One story tells how he treated a Zoroastrian family with such kindness that they converted to Islam (Zarrinkub 1990, 39). Another prominent Sufi, Sheikh Abusa'id Abulkhair (967–1049), was also kind to Jews and Christians, and there is an account of him

and his followers visiting a church on Sunday (Munavvar 2002:1, 131–210).

Rumi's mentor, Shams al-Din Muhammad Tabrizi (vanished 1247), presents yet another example. He not only denounced persecution of non-Muslims, but even prayed for Jews (Tabrizi 1988, 121). According to Shams, nonbelievers should not be persecuted, since some of them have sufficient credit with God to ask Him to forgive "a hundred thousand Muslims on the Judgment Day" (Tabrizi 1988, 127). He once told his followers, "Let us go to the brothels and visit those poor women. Good or bad, they are also creations of God. And let us also visit the churches" (Tabrizi 1988, 302).¹⁰ Finally, in an account reminding us of Abusa'id, he says, "I went to the church and visited my infidel friends" (Tabrizi 1988, 629).

Rumi is also said to be kind to non-Muslims, some of whom consequently converted to Islam (Aflaki 1996, 139–40, 153, 274, 361). According to one story, when Rumi was asked by a Jew, "Whose religion is better, mine or yours?" he responds, "Yours." The surprised Jew immediately converted to Islam (Aflaki 1996, 484). It is also noteworthy that Rumi's poetry—rich in its call for toleration and peaceful coexistence—"contributed to the diffusion of Sufi ideas amongst Persian Jews" (Fenton n.d.:1, 764). According to another story, one day Rumi and a group of his followers were passing by a winery where music was playing. Rumi started the Sufi's ecstatic dance (*sama'*) to the music, and continued dancing until the next morning. When the Armenians who were drinking in the winery walked out the next day and saw him dancing, they went to him and converted to Islam. In light of many accounts of Rumi's kindness toward them, it is not surprising to read that a large number of Christians and Jews participated in his burial ceremony.

We may conclude this survey with the following two tales. It has been said that the Orthodox Sheikh Ahmad Jam (d. 1141/2) was in the habit of harshly punishing those who drank wine. He even beat his own wife to paralysis because she and some other women had visited a grape yard (not to be mistaken for a winery; Tadayun n.d., 247). In contrast, it is also said that one day the Rejoicing Sheikh Abusa'id and his followers were passing by the burial site of some Sufi sheikhs, where they encountered a group of people drinking wine and playing music. Sheikh's outraged followers wanted to attack the disrespectful crowd. Abusa'id stopped them. He then approached the drunks and said, "May God make your afterlife as happy as your temporal life." Upon hearing Abusa'id,

they broke the wine bottles and instruments of music, and "became pious" (Munavvar 2002, 237).

The Rejoicing Sufis were themselves subject to frequent persecution or threats of persecution. On occasions, the Orthodox Sufis were involved in such harassments. Famous Sufis, such as Mansur Hallaj (858?–922), 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamedani (1098–1131), and Shaykh Shahab al-Din Suhrevaridi (1155–91), lost their lives to such persecutions. Even a grand Sheikh like Abusa'id Abulkhair was not immune from persecution by religious scholars and Orthodox Sufis (Zarrinkub 1990, 61).

While the medieval Persian-speaking world presented a diverse conceptual milieu for toleration and persecution, it is also important to recognize the diversity in institutional practices of toleration and persecution at Rumi's time. The conflict between the Byzantine Empire and the Saljuq Sultans, and the diverse ethnic and religious composition of the Saljuq territories, cultivated a unique environment in Konya and other parts of Asia Minor. Both Christians and Jews lived in the Saljuq territories, and there is no evidence of any large-scale or systematic persecution of these minorities.

Most Saljuq Kings of Iran, of whom the Sultans of Asia Minor were at one time vassals, were known for their unwavering Sunni orthodoxy, which put them in constant clashes with the Ismaili Shia. About one-fifth of the best-known political text of the Saljuq era, *Siyasatnameh*, is about the history of heretics, and praises the kings and caliphs who persecuted them. It is important to recall that *Siyasatnameh* was written by Nizam al-Mulk (1018–92), the most famous Saljuq Grand Vazir, addressing the Saljuq King Malekshah. According to the author, the heretics are "the worst enemies of Islam" and "the unbelievers are more merciful toward Muslims than the heretics" (Tusi 1980, 227, 286). These "heretics" were primarily the minority Shia, who were frequently subject to more severe persecution than the Jews and the Christians. In choosing Asia Minor for his residence, Najm al-Din Razi, a contemporary of Rumi, specifically mentions the Saljuq princes' strict commitment to Sunni Islam, and approves their wars against "infidels and atheists" (Razi 2005, 20–21).

Toward the Jews and particularly Christians, the Saljuq princes exercised a dual policy. They used jihad against Christian Byzantine to expand westward, while "circumstantial tolerance" was extended toward Jews and Christians within the Saljuq territories. Thus, in general, the Jews and Christians who paid *jaziyeh* (the protection tax) were immune from persecution. On

occasion, however, persecution did take place even against the jaziyyeh-paying non-Muslims. Shams Tabrizi, for instance, mentions the case of a city where the Jews would not leave their homes early in the morning, because the Muslim residents believed they would be rewarded by God if they disturbed the Jews at such a time (Tabrizi 1998, 134).

Meanwhile, the practice of jihad by Turkic dynasties of medieval Iran had a long tradition. Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi (971–1030), for example, was famous for his raids on India. Labeling them “holy wars,” he killed and enslaved “nonbelievers” and destroyed their temples. Sultan Tokash, Muhammad Kharazmshah’s father, is known to have engaged in forty holy wars with the Romans (Jovaini 1999, 206, 210). His grandson and a contemporary of Rumi, Sultan Jalal al-Din, destroyed the churches of Tbilisi and replaced them with mosques (Jovaini 1999, 285). Interestingly, just like “circumstantial toleration,” these practices of jihad had pragmatic motivations, as they enriched the king’s treasury by looting the infidels’ wealth.¹¹

Rumi's Defense of Toleration

In the study of languages of toleration, answers to two questions are important. First, why should despised ideas and practices be tolerated, assuming those who despise them are capable of persecuting them? Second, what does it mean to tolerate such ideas and practices? In answering the first question, one may borrow from Plato’s treatment of justice in *The Republic* (357a–357d). Toleration may be assessed as a desirable practice with undesirable outcomes, an undesirable practice with desirable outcomes, or a desirable practice with desirable outcomes. Based on the first assessment of toleration, while “permissiveness” could feel good and even make life easier at times, it will lead to moral corruption, and deprives the tolerant party of salvation. Based on the second assessment, while toleration leads to suffering by exposing one to unpleasant ideas or practices, it also leads to such highly sought goods as peace and/or rational discourse toward discovery of the truth. This is the widely articulated assessment of toleration in the Western tradition, rooted in the concept *Tolerantia*, which emphasizes being burdened. The third assessment suggests that the very act of tolerating, if not pleasant, is at least useful, and it also could lead to desirable outcomes, such as conversion of the nonbelievers. As we shall see shortly, Rumi follows this less frequently invoked assessment.

Hans R. Guggisberg has suggested that toleration has traditionally been defended on theological–philosophical, politico-pragmatic, or economic grounds (Guggisberg 1983, 37). None of these categories explains Rumi’s defense of toleration. In medieval Europe, the pragmatic defense was frequently invoked by the advocates of toleration. John of Salisbury’s theory of tolerance was “politico-pragmatic,” and Marsiglio of Padua’s position was “communal functionalist.” In this paradigm, toleration is not a moral virtue, but at most an instrument to make moral virtue possible. In contrast, Rumi’s arguments in support of toleration are primarily made on moral grounds: persecution is wrong even if it does not disturb peace or economic prosperity.

Guggisberg identifies the “hope for restoration of religious consensus” as the most important element of “the theological-philosophical argument” (Guggisberg 1983, 37). But Rumi neither believes such a consensus ever existed, nor is hopeful that it could be achieved in the future. Indeed, he finds no particular value in such a consensus. As we shall see shortly, Rumi finds religious diversity to be an outcome of the divine design. Finally, Rumi finds economic concerns at the bottom of the hierarchy of goods, and unworthy of any consideration.

In response to what it means to tolerate, three practices have been presented: ignoring, permitting, and recognizing. A contemporary example of ignoring is the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy applied to the gay members of the military services in the United States. The tolerant party is willing to ignore the existence of the tolerated action or idea as long as it is not made public.

Permitting or “tolerance-as-grace” has been widely practiced in Europe and the Middle East. It takes place when the tolerant party grants legal rights for expression of ideas and practices to the tolerated party. Treatment of Jews and Christians as prescribed in the Quran and the Edict of Nantes are instances of this practice. Traditionally, Islam has granted certain rights and protections to Jews and Christians, allowing them to practice their religion, although Muslims, with rare exception, such as Rumi, consider Judaism or Christianity inferior to Islam. Similarly, by the Edict of Nantes, the French king agreed to certain rights for the Huguenots, without recognizing any value in the Huguenots’ moral beliefs and practices. On the contrary, the Catholics continued to consider the Protestant beliefs and practices false and even offensive.

Finally, recognition is the practice in which the tolerating party not only offers legal sanction to the tolerated party, but also is aware of the value of intellectual or spiritual engagement between the two

sides. This engagement is not exclusively initiated and sustained to convert the tolerated party, but benefits the tolerant party beyond and above immediate pragmatic and policy concerns.¹² This elevates the position of the tolerated from “unwanted” to “desired,” hence reducing the status gap between the two parties. The tolerant party does not need to agree that the values and practices of the tolerated are on par with his or her own, but rather recognizes (a) the essential humanity of the tolerated and (b) the value of tolerating, even if the tolerated cannot be converted. This is Rumi’s approach to non-Muslims.

What encourages Rumi to take this less traveled road is his understanding of the man–God relationship, which he finds to have three manifestations: The first manifestation is spiritual conversion. This leads to the love relationship between the individual and God, the most genuine bond in the spiritual domain.¹³ The second manifestation is the linguistic expression of conversion. According to Rumi, because language is inherently deficient in expressing spiritual experiences, the convert can never linguistically express the spiritual truth that he or she has experienced. The third manifestation is the institutionalization of the relationship between man and God through religion, whose rituals establish a formal association. This is the least valuable mode of the man–God relationship, and at least potentially an obstacle to a genuine spiritual awakening.

Rumi argues that all three spiritual manifestations need to be protected from persecution. To convince his audience, he offers five arguments in defense of toleration. No other medieval Persian author made such a comprehensive and passionate effort to convince his audience to abandon religious persecution. The following is a summary of these arguments.

1. Unity of Existence

Unity of existence (*vahdat-e wujud*) is one of the main pillars of many schools of Islamic mysticism, although these schools present different interpretations of this principle. Rumi believes that the essence of existence is the same, as all that exists is created by God:

In essence (meaning) there is no division and numeration,
Nor there is diversity and separation.

And,

In the beginning, we were all of the same infinite essence,

Without beginning, without any end;
Of one core we were, like the rays of Sun,
Like water we were unknotted. (Rumi 1995, 45)

False religion and nonbelievers cannot have an essence created by anything other than God:

Whether it is blasphemy or faith,
It is produced by [God] and belongs to Him. (Rumi 1995, 346)

This, of course, leads to a number of well-known theological challenges addressed by scholars of religion over the centuries. Let me briefly point to one relevant question: If indeed all things are from God, then is evil “Godly” as well?

One response, following St. Augustine, states that evil is the absence of being. Rumi, however, did not believe in such a vacuum of being, and instead suggested that what we perceive as evil is also created by God. There are two ways a Muslim like Rumi can support this idea. First, in the Quran, certain characteristics that may be considered evil are attributed to Allah. For instance, Allah is referred to as “the greatest (or best) of all plotters/deceivers” (3:54). This of course does not mean that Muslims believe God is engaged in deception to harm others, but that deception, often abhorred by human codes of ethics, has a “useful” place in the divine design, which is free of defects. In Rumi’s poetry, we frequently encounter stories about such “beneficial” deception, which is necessary to help those who otherwise cannot overcome obstacles in order to experience spiritual awakening.

But, how can Rumi explain evil on the micro or human level, for example, the Mongol invasion, which led to the massacre of so many innocent Muslims? Rumi offers two explanations here. First, such painful events are the consequences of human actions. As Rumi says,

This world is like a mountain, our action like sound.
(Rumi 1995, 18)

And,

Often the oppressive behavior you see in others,
Is your own personality reflected by them
Looking through purple glass
You see the world purple. (Rumi 1995, 82)

And elsewhere,

Moses and Pharaoh are both part of your essence,
You can find within yourself, these two opposing forces.
(Rumi 1995, 466)

What is referred to as evil, then, is the consequence of free will. But because free will is essential to human existence and essentially good as a part of God's design, its consequences are also good when observed from a vantage point higher than that of the unenlightened masses.

In a position similar to Augustine's, Rumi suggests that human observations often fall short of comprehending the greater scheme of the divine design. The only real evil is resistance to good, and such resistance is due to ignorance. Even what is painful has a positive result:

Sorrow, fear and misfortune are nothing but God's rope
Pulling your ear, pain brings you to the palace of generosity. (Rumi 1983, 358)

By relying on the unity-of-existence argument and removing the traditional demarcation between good and evil, Rumi suggests that persecution is wrong, or at least futile. Indeed, it could even be counterproductive by producing heretics, whom Rumi, along with most other Muslims, believes to be worse than infidels. If evil is an individual's resistance to good due to ignorance, the only "cure" is to educate that individual. Rumi did not believe in compulsory education, nor did he have faith in success of such education in converting non-Muslims. Therefore, all conversions needed to be voluntary.

2. Unity of Religious Truth

According to Muslims, God has sent 124,000 prophets to guide peoples to truth. While Muhammad is considered the last prophet and Islam the most comprehensive religion, other God-initiated religions are also considered to include at least elements of truth. The Quran, however, is explicit about tolerating "People of the Book," who even in a broad interpretation often embraces only Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians.

Some Sufis, like Rumi, further argue that the essence of all religions is the same. In Rumi's words, "Ahmad's name is the name of all prophets" (Rumi 1995, 70).¹⁴ And elsewhere,

When a person looks at the essence (soul)
He sees Moses and Muhammad as the same. (Rumi 1995, 961)¹⁵

Going beyond the concept of "People of the Book," Rumi embraces toleration of religions other than Christianity and Judaism. This multiplicity of religious understanding is not alarming to Rumi:

If there are a hundred [sacred] books, they are nothing but the same chapter
The hundred directions taken are to the same altar.
(Rumi 1995, 1191)¹⁶

And,

Since the beloved is only one,
Religions are nothing but the same. (Rumi 1995, 507)

Elsewhere he reiterates,

If there are ten lamps in a place,
You may see the difference among the lamps
However the light from each is the same,
Once you observe the light, your doubts disappear.
(Rumi 1995, 44)¹⁷

Those who see differences in the essence of various religions suffer from spiritual defects. In Rumi's analogy, such defects are similar to how a person who suffers from diplopia sees the same object as two (Rumi 1995, 24). Indeed, the institution of religion is itself the main problem, as it deforms our understanding of God, which is the cause of persecution and conflict:

When the colorless became subject to colors
Jew started fighting Jew;
Should the original colorlessness return
Even Moses and Pharaoh will make peace. (Rumi 1995, 142)

There are two explanations for persecution sponsored by institutional religion. First, the charlatans and the hateful use institutional religion for their own illegitimate purposes. Rumi describes the human drive for reaching God as analogous to a man's search for his lost camel. As the man asks others whether they have seen his camel, they—who have no idea where the animal is—give him false information to collect the rewards he gives them for their information. Religious authorities mislead and exploit their followers the same way by falsely claiming that they know where God can be found.

In another story, Rumi gives an example of how a Jewish king, assisted by his minister, attempts to annihilate the Christian community in his kingdom. Through a plot, the minister infiltrates the Christian community and becomes its religious leader. He then calls ten prominent members of the community individually to a secret meeting. Saying he is about to die, the minister privately tells each of the ten that he is to become the religious leader upon the minister's

death. He also gives each man a different set of instructions, and then commits suicide. Each of the ten men announces his claim to leadership, and presents the instructions given to him by the minister. This leads to bloodshed, and the death of a “hundred thousand Christians” (Rumi 1995, 24–46).

Second, the masses cannot see the unity of the “colorless” truth beyond the various “colors” of institutional religions (Rumi 1995, 24–25). Indeed, they fight each other while advocating the same concept. In another story, Rumi tells us about a Persian, a Turk, a Roman, and an Arab who were jointly given a silver coin. Each of them in his own language proposes that they should purchase some grapes with the money. Because they do not understand each other’s language, a fight breaks out (Rumi 1995, 395).

Rumi also brings a modified version of an old allegory, “the elephant in darkness,” to illustrate his claim that shortcomings of human perception are the source of disagreements, particularly, religious ones. According to Rumi’s version of the story, a group of Hindus brings an elephant to a town at night. People of the town, impatient to wait until the morning, go to the dark room where the elephant is kept. Unable to see the animal, they can only perceive it through touching. Upon touching different parts of the elephant’s body, each person describes the elephant differently. One, who has touched its ear, describes it as similar to a fan. Another, who has touched its trunk, says the elephant is like a gutter. A third man, who has touched its leg, describes the elephant as similar to a pillar. Finally, a person who has touched its back describes it as like a bed. Rumi concludes,

If each of them had a candle at hand,
There would be no difference in their statements. (Rumi 1995, 466)

The above story had been told before Rumi, and has its roots in the Buddhist tradition (Baqeri 1991).¹⁸ At least two other medieval Sufis, Muhammad Ghazali and Abulmajd Sana’i, recounted similar stories in their Persian texts (Sana’i 2001, 32–33; Ghazali 2004:1, 59). It is important to point to an essential difference between Rumi’s version of this story and those of Ghazali and Sana’i. While Ghazali (2004) and Sana’i (2001) describe those who visited the elephant as blind, in Rumi’s version, the visitors’ inadequate perception is due to the darkness of the room and not physical disability. One may conclude that for Sana’i and Ghazali, human beings are inherently incapable of achieving an accurate

understanding of the truth. For Rumi, the obstacle to such understanding is environmental, and not due to human nature.¹⁹

The ramification of this difference for the discussion of toleration is evident. If human beings are by nature incompetent in accessing the truth, any hope for enduring peaceful coexistence among various religions would depend solely on the utility of toleration. In the absence of such utility, there would be no defense of toleration. But if the failure to access the truth can be overcome by appropriate environmental modifications, peaceful coexistence would be conceivable. The similarity of Rumi’s version of the “elephant in the darkness” to Plato’s “allegory of the cave” is apparent.²⁰ The two stories suggest similar conclusions: human beings are imprisoned by perceptions that are far from the truth. These perceptions are the source of disagreement and conflict among people. Accessing universal truth is possible, and it can lead to harmony.²¹

Again similar to Plato, Rumi finds the ignorance and the conflict it causes a matter of immaturity:

Strictness and intolerance are signs of immaturity,
You drink blood while you’re a fetus. (Rumi 1995, 468).

However, Rumi appears more optimistic than Plato about the possibility of educating a sufficient number of people, or at least having enough enlightened leaders, to overcome conflict resulting from ignorance.²²

Claiming that its mission is to guide human beings to God, often institutional religion and its orthodoxy separates people from God. Rumi states this in one of the best-known stories of his *Masnavi*. One day, Moses hears a shepherd talking to God:

Where are you, so I can become your servant?
[I will] repair your shoes, comb your hair
.
.
.
Wash your cloths kill your lice
Bring you milk, oh you the magnificent
And if you ever become sick
I will look after you the way I would take care of myself
I will kiss your hand, massage your feet
At night, I will prepare your bed. (Rumi 1995, 303)

The outraged Moses approaches the shepherd, accusing him of blasphemy and telling him that if he does not stop his irreverence, God’s rage will burn the world. The remorseful shepherd apologizes to Moses and disappears in the desert. But then God reminds

Moses that he was sent to connect people to God, not separate them. The shepherd's worship, God tells Moses, is acceptable from him, as different people worship God in different ways:

I witness the submissive hearts,
Even if the words [that express the heart] are not humble.

Upon hearing God, Moses finds the shepherd and tells him,

Don't worry about rituals
Worship as your heart desires
For your blasphemy is religion, and your religion the light of soul
You are under God's protection, and the world is protected because of you. (Rumi 1995, 306).²³

In a striking statement, Rumi emphasizes that freedom of worship is what God wants:

This is the divine decree:
"Speak freely,
Say what comes to your mind without worry
The way that children talk to their father." (Rumi 1995, 153)

Could institutionalized religion play any positive role in human life? Rumi certainly believes so:

So, don't say [religions] are all straying fantasies
There is some truth in fantasies
. . .
One who says [religions] are all true is stupid
One who says they are false is miserable. (Rumi 1995, 360)

We may conclude that for Rumi, institutionalized religion has two benefits: First, any religion can have at least the utility of bringing a human being to some proximity to God. Second, there is some truth in any religion, and with appropriate guidance, any one could—although in a limited manner—help an individual to discover himself or herself and his or her relationship to God.

The inherent limitation of institutionalized religion, meanwhile, applies to Islam and Muslims as well. Rumi quotes the Prophet Muhammad saying that he is like a mirror, in which each person simply sees himself or herself (Rumi 1995, 137). The less the mirror is tarnished by the institutionalization process, the better it can help one to discover his or her own soul. Therefore, the more primitive religion of the shepherd may be more valuable than the more institutionalized religion of the Prophet Moses.

3. The Deficiency of Analytical Reason

If one looks for a common denominator among various Sufi orders, it may well be their dislike of philosophers, because philosophers claim to know how to access the truth via reason. Even the tolerant Rumi is not shy of expressing his dismay at those who believe reason can independently discover the universal truth, warning them against standing on "shaky wooden legs" (Rumi 1995, 125). Of course, Rumi does not claim that reason has no place in human life. His general views of the human intellect and its capabilities and limitations are beyond the scope of this article. However, he is clear that the human intellect is inherently incompetent in grasping the genuine knowledge of God and universal truth.

Given its incompetence, reason cannot be appealed to in separating the true religion from the false ones. A religion cannot claim a position of superiority over other religions based on "reasonableness"; nor can analytical reason be presented as a valuable pedagogy in spiritual matters. An individual can know about God only through an existential experience. Obviously such an experience cannot be forced on a human being, and indeed, use of force, even Augustinian "mild torture," can have perverse impacts.

Rejection of analytical reason as the means to demonstrate the true religion is quite significant to the defense of toleration. The claim that the true religion can be discovered via reason leads to dehumanization of those who adhere to other religions. As history testifies, those labeled as such have often become subject to various repressive measures and severe persecution. Furthermore, if religions other than the "true one" are understood as being against reason, the value of toleration as—for instance—the promoter of diversity becomes less evident. Why defend unreasonableness? In that case, one would argue that at best, toleration promotes diversity, even of wrongness. Therefore, to move religion beyond reason is a major step toward inclusive toleration.

4. Tolerance and Conversion

Earlier I pointed to examples of a multitude of stories describing how some Sufi leaders' practice of tolerance triggered conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. According to Rumi, even God tolerates in order to facilitate genuine conversion. Rumi tells us the story of an entertainer whose delightful voice and music "could even make an elephant fly with joy" (Rumi 1995, 113). This kind of entertainment promotes bodily and sensual delight, and is therefore condemned by Islam, and is fundamentally different

from the Sufi music and dance, which hopes to facilitate spiritual awakening.

While during his youth, the entertainer of Rumi's story is popular, but once old, he cannot perform well any longer and lives in poverty. One day, not knowing where he is going to have his next meal, he tells God, "I cannot find business today, and will be your guest." He goes to the graveyard and plays his harp until he falls asleep (Rumi 1995, 122). At the same time, God caused the second caliph, 'Omar, to fall asleep as well (Rumi 1995, 123). While asleep, God told the caliph to go to the graveyard and give his "special and honorable servant" seven hundred gold coins.

'Omar goes to the graveyard, where he only finds the sleeping entertainer, and questions how this sinner could be God's special servant. Not finding anyone else, the caliph concludes that the entertainer is the one to whom he should give the money. Upon waking up, the entertainer fears that the caliph is there to punish him for his sinful career. But 'Omar tells him that he has been instructed by God to give him the gold, and that once the money is spent, he can go to the caliph for more. Hearing this, the entertainer starts crying and smashing his harp, accusing it of keeping God away from him and keeping him from the road to truth. Rumi concludes,

Since ['Omar] became a mirror for sacred secrets
The harpist's existence was awakened from within.
(Rumi 1995, 128–29)

In two other Sufi texts, Muhammad ibn-e Munavvar's *Asrar al-Tuwḥid* and Farid al-Din 'Attar's *Mosibatnameh*, similar stories are presented (Munavvar 2002:1, 107–8; 'Attar 2001, 340–41). However, in both of these stories, instead of 'Omar, it is Abusa'd Abulkhair who comes to the harpist's assistance. Also, in neither of the earlier versions is the assistance to the harpist initiated by God's explicit instruction. There is very little doubt that Rumi was well acquainted with 'Attar's poems, and his modification to the original story appears intentional and as such very significant.

One important message of Rumi's version of the story is that toleration for the sake of conversion is not simply a policy advanced by temporal authorities, but rather, it is instructed by God. In fact, according to Rumi, what made various prophets unique and close to God was their patience with those who opposed and denied them (Rumi 1995, 1092). Rumi's choice of 'Omar for this story is also important. In Monnavar's and Attar's versions, the encounter is between the

harper and a Sufi Sheikh, who could claim spiritual authority only over his own followers. Choosing 'Omar, the second caliph, who enjoyed both spiritual and temporal authority over all Muslims of his time, suggests that Rumi believes toleration should be also practiced by the sovereign and as a matter of policy. Furthermore, 'Omar had a reputation for religious austerity. Hence, Rumi also implies that toleration is not in conflict with strict observance of religious codes.

In another story, Rumi describes how a group of unbelievers (*kafirs*) arrives at a place where the prophet Muhammad and some of his followers had gathered. The unbelievers ask the prophet if they can become his guests. Accepting them to the gathering, the prophet asks each of his followers to take an unbeliever to his home for the night and feed him. The prophet himself takes one of the guests, who upon arriving at Muhammad's home eats all the available food without concern for others. A member of the household who was mad at this inconsiderate guest locks the door to the guest's room, preventing him from appropriately relieving himself in the middle of the night.

The poor guest ends up dirtying his bed, relieving himself in distress. Early in the morning, Muhammad, who knows what has happened with his guest, opens the lock without letting the guest know. As soon as the guest has a chance, he leaves the room and hides. Someone brings the dirty bed to Muhammad, who then starts washing it himself. Observing what Muhammad is doing, the unbeliever converts to Islam (Rumi 1995, 826–29). While there are no historical grounds for this story, there are two accounts of non-believers arriving at Muhammad and his followers as guests, but neither includes Rumi's description of a guest dirtying his bed (Shahidi 2003, 13–14).

As elsewhere, it is essential not to ignore Rumi's intention in manipulating the preceding accounts. In addition to demonstrating the impact of toleration on converting unbelievers, Rumi hopes to send a second message. It was a long-established tradition that Muslims should avoid even body contact with non-Muslims. Describing Muhammad washing the dirty bed of an unbeliever delivers a powerful blow to that tradition. As all Muslims believe that Muhammad presents the best example of a righteous human being, Rumi challenges the fundamentalists of his time to go beyond a strict reading of Islam, at least when it comes to dealing with non-Muslims. Thus, by one account, Rumi's tolerant attitude led to the conversion of eighteen thousand nonbelievers (Aflaki 1996, 611).

5. Difference by God's Design

On various occasions, Rumi points out the differences among societies and cultures, as well as the diversity among members of the same society and culture. To him, these differences are not incidental or outcomes of diverse historical developments, but are the results of divine design. In the previously mentioned story of the shepherd, Rumi quotes God telling Moses,

"In everyone I have put a different disposition
To everyone I have given a different logic
What is extolling for him is reproaching for you
What is nectarine for him is poison for you." (Rumi 1995, 304-5)²⁴

Indeed, those who criticize each other on theological grounds would be distancing themselves from God. In yet another story, Rumi gives the example of four Muslims in India who go to a mosque for prayer. As the four are praying, one of them asks a question of the person who calls Muslims to prayer (*mu'azzen*), an act that according to Islam voids one's prayer. His friend turns to him, saying, "You talked and voided your prayer." The third person says, "Why do you blame him? Look at yourself." The fourth one says, "Thank God that I did not commit the same mistake as these three." Rumi concludes,

Thus all four wasted their prayers
Those who blame others, become themselves further lost
Lucky the one who sees his own shortcomings
One, who points to others' failings, exposes his own.
(Rumi 1995, 346)

Looking at the breadth of Rumi's tolerance, one may conclude that he believed in the relativity (or multiplicity) of religious truth. Such a conclusion, as tempting as it may be, cannot be supported, as Rumi unmistakably believes in universal truth, and his defense of toleration is deeply rooted in this conviction. Neither should Rumi's argument that God is the author of cultural diversity be understood as evidence of relativism. The universal truth was, albeit to different degrees, revealed to Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad. Yet they lived and functioned within different cultural settings, which impacted the understanding of their various followers of their respective messages.

That some have less access to truth does not make them dispensable or worthless:

God directed [Muhammad] to consult other Muslims,
Although no one [has ever been] more knowledgeable
than him. (Rumi 1995, 170)²⁵

What allows for reconciliation of the universality of truth and Rumi's nonutilitarian theory of toleration is his argument that, for the most part, human beings' capacity for understanding truth is limited. This limitation is natural, and cannot be overcome without extensive and assiduous efforts. The masses, incapable of going through such a process, are at best able to see some blurred manifestations of the truth, which is both expected and permissible.²⁶

After reading the above five arguments in defense of tolerance, one may ask about Rumi's intention in advancing them. Clearly, Rumi was neither a political theorist nor a politician. Composing a theory of toleration was not one of his intentions. It is also important to remember that he did not write any treatise, nor did he present his arguments with an eye to theoretical consistency. As a mystic and a poet, he is trying to convince his audience by touching their souls, not changing their minds at an intellectual level. This does not mean that Rumi is unaware of or indifferent to politics. In fact, he was in contact with the Saljuq princes of his time and close to one of the most powerful ministers of the Saljuq court, Mu'in al-Din Parvaneh. For Rumi, influencing policy required converting the politicians. That conversion could not be caused by elaborated political theories, but by symbolic stories that could trigger an existential transformation.

The Limit of Rumi's Toleration

For Rumi, the limit to toleration of behavior is violence:

You should not even kill a donkey for expediency's sake
But you should kill it if it becomes violent
Although the [violent] donkey has no access to reason
God does not excuse him from punishment
Therefore, when a human being acts savagely,
How could s/he be excused? (Rumi 1995, 185)

Consequently, the justification for jihad is not the hope of converting non-Muslims to Islam, but protecting Muslims by taking away the "sword from the hands of the insane" (Rumi 1995, 703). Even here, Rumi argues that killing the violent non-Muslim is not free of benefit for him. God reserves severe afterlife punishments for

such a person. By stopping his violence, the violent person is saved from that punishment (Rumi 1995, 621–22).

Violence, however, does not need to be through direct use of force. In fact, authority in the hands of a vicious person could lead to use of force by others. Rumi reminds the reader how leaving the pen in the hands of cruel people led to the execution of the famous Sufi Mansur Hallaj (Rumi 1995, 703). We need to recall that those who approved the execution of Hallaj were recognized as Muslim leaders, and even some Sufis—at least implicitly—approved his execution. Thus, it is not disbelief, hypocrisy, or affiliation with the “false” religions that determines the legitimacy of persecution. Only the practice of violence justifies the use of counterforce. In an important departure from the tradition, Rumi is silent about persecuting even the hypocrites (whom he clearly despises) unless they become violent.

Conclusion

The contemporary discourse of toleration has been overwhelmed by the presumption that toleration is, and could only be, part of the liberal tradition, or a product of Western civilization. There are compelling reasons to challenge this presumption vigorously. Rumi’s writings provide a valuable opportunity to demonstrate that toleration is neither originally liberal nor exclusively Western. Indeed, Rumi, a medieval Muslim Sufi, presents us with one of the broadest invitations to toleration, medieval or modern.

Furthermore, Rumi’s defense of toleration provides us with evidence that neither relativism nor skepticism is a prerequisite for theories of toleration.²⁷ Rumi believes in universal truth, and the incompetency of human reason is a part of that truth. However, a genuine relationship with God, salvation, or a healthy spiritual life does not require instrumental reason, and to various degrees can be achieved by different people in different ways. In a broader context, while Rawlsian arguments for toleration advocate compromise because of the multiplicity of concepts of the good, Rumi invites us to see a universal good expressed and approached in various ways.²⁸

Rumi also reminds us that pragmatic considerations do not have to be taken into account in order to advance a robust defense of far-reaching toleration. In the Western tradition of toleration, such pragmatic considerations are in abundance. Medieval thinkers, like John of Salisbury and Marsiglio of Padua, used them

frequently, and early modern authors referred to them liberally. However, reliance on pragmatic justifications for toleration can be both limiting and weak. Locke’s defense of toleration, for instance, is at least dithering when it comes to the Catholics, “and he is famous for denying toleration to atheists” (Wolfson 1997, 216).²⁹ As David J. Lorenzo has observed, this is a consequence of Locke’s reliance on pragmatic justification (Lorenzo 2003). Avoiding “prudence” and “pragmatism,” Rumi is tolerant of all who believe in God regardless of their religious affiliation, and does not sanction the persecution of the (peaceful) atheists either.

But above all, Rumi’s message is about peaceful coexistence and respect for the multiplicity of human spiritual experiences. Neither of these could be achieved unless differences of beliefs and practices, to the extent that they are genuine and nonviolent, are tolerated. If God gives human beings freedom to express themselves to Him freely, then human beings have no right to curtail that freedom, which for Rumi is the key to authentic life and salvation.

Given Rumi’s attitude toward respecting “others,” and his vigorous advocacy of tolerance, it is not surprising to read that at his funeral, various people, “Romans and Turks . . . Christians and Jews,” participated:

Followers of all religions truthful with him
Members of all communities in love with him . . .
Christians said he was [like] their Jesus
. . .
Jews said he was like their Moses. (Sultan Valad 1997, 103)

Notes

1. The reference to *language* in the title is to the usage of the Cambridge School as utilized by—among others—Quentin Skinner and John Pocock. See, for example, Tully (1988).

2. Rumi’s popularity in the United States has been referred to as “astonishing.” The most recent indication of this recognition was designation of 2007 as the “Year of Rumi” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). A decade earlier, Coleman Barks’s translation of a selection of Rumi’s poems sold 250,000 copies in two years, making him “the best-selling poet in the United States.” For more on this, see Lewis (2003, 1–3) and Clinton (1999, 149).

3. *Toleration* and *tolerance* have been used interchangeably in this article. I am aware of some objections to this interchangeability, but arbitrary distinctions, for example, Andrew Murphy’s (1997, 593–623), are often of little use beyond the scope of an author’s specific project.

4. For an example, see Hofmann (1998, 145).

5. In the face of mounting historical evidence to the contrary, this misconception has been surprisingly enduring. In 1946,

Wilhelm Pauck (1946, 220) claimed that "one of the greatest achievements of the democratic state is the establishment of religious tolerance or the freedom of religion." Almost fifty years later, Steven Kautz (1993, 610) implies a similar misconception by stating, "Tolerance is a liberal virtue: it is among the most honorable of the respectable habits of liberal citizens." With lesser illusion, Nick Fotion and Gerard Elfstrom (1992, 118) state, "What sets liberal democracy apart from these other societies is the particular type of toleration it espouses: toleration of the belief, speech, or action of *individuals* by other members of society and government."

6. James Q. Wilson (2002), for example, has suggested that "Islam is centuries behind [the West] in developing" religious toleration.

7. In fact, one of the earliest known cases of pragmatic toleration goes back to the reign of Cyrus II of Persia. For more on this, see Masroori (1999).

8. Rumi's poems are collected in three books, *Masnavi*, *Divan-e Shams* (also known as *Divan-e Kabir*), and *Ruba'iyat*. Several of Rumi's sermons are collected in *Fih-e ma Fih*. Some of Rumi's letters and seven more of his sermons are collected in *Maktubat va majalis-e Sab'eh*. For detailed biographies of Rumi, see Foruzanfar (2003) and Lewis (2003).

9. There were also Sufis who advocated toleration in passing and without much elaboration. An example is Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz. Others, such as Muslih al-Din S'adi Shirazi, adopted contradictory positions, as they promoted tolerance at some places and advocated persecution in others.

10. The contrast between this attitude and toleration of prostitution in medieval Europe, generally justified as prevention of sodomy, should not be ignored.

11. Finally, conflicts among various Muslim sects were also frequent and at times brutal. For example, see Boyle (1968:5, 284–85).

12. This is similar to what Michael Walzer (1997, 11) refers to as "curiosity; perhaps even respect, a willingness to listen and learn."

13. Reaching its ultimate stage, the love relationship leads to such a close proximity between man and God that physical body remains the only obstacle to a full unification. In Muhammad Este'lami's words, "Rumi's spiritual ladder is Love, which constitutes one answer to the unlimited number of questions" (Este'lami 2003, 431).

14. Ahmad is one of the titles of the prophet Muhammad.

15. Fakhr al-Din 'Araqi also expresses the same concept: "When I became drunk [by the Divine Love], whether Church or Mecca" ('Araqi 2003, 109).

16. In another place, he says

In meaning there is no division and numbers

In meaning there is no separation and individuals. (Rumi 1995, 45).

17. Rumi repeats the same concept in his *Divan-e Shams* (Rumi 1983, 89).

18. David Scott, who otherwise gives an informative description of the encounter between Sufism and Buddhism, fails to point to the impact of Buddhism on eleventh- to thirteenth-century Sufis, although such impact was significant (Scott 1995).

19. There is little doubt that Rumi knew about these earlier versions. He was very familiar with Sana'i's poetry, admired him in his *Masnavi* several times, and even made a direct reference to *Hadiqat al-Hadiqeh* (Rumi 1995, 537). Given Rumi's extensive

education in Islamic theology and law, it is highly unlikely that he had not read Ghazali's writings.

20. Interestingly, according to an Arabic version of this story, which precedes the Persian versions, it is Plato who narrates the story of the blind people and the elephant (Al-Tawhidi 1992, 259–60).

21. It should not surprise us that this story has been linked to Plato. For more, see Baqeri (1991, 674–75).

22. There is significant evidence that mystics of Rumi's period were familiar with the Platonic and neo-Platonist school of thought. For example, see Schimmel (1975, 317) and Zarrinkub (1984, 217).

23. Abdulkarim Soroush (Soroush 2000a, 167–211) points to two Arabic texts where stories with a conclusion similar to that of Rumi's "Moses and the Shepherd" are presented. About a hundred years after Rumi, 'Ubeid Zakani told a story very similar to Rumi's. In Zakani's story, we find a mason instead of a shepherd (Zakani 2004, 361–65).

24. Also, see Rumi (1995, 148–49). Some have suggested that this poem is based on Quranic verses 17:84 and 30:22 (for example, see Khurramshahi and Mukhtari 2003, 184).

25. The reference is to Quran 3:159.

26. The essence of this thesis is adopted by such contemporary Muslim reformists as Abdulkarim Soroush and Mohammad Khatami. For more, see Masroori (2007) and Soroush 2000b.

27. Writing about European medieval toleration, István Bejczy correctly observes, "Medieval *Tolerantia* . . . is an even more coherent and forceful concept than the rather loose notion of tolerance in modern political discourse precisely because it has nothing to do with religious freedom or plurality of truth" (Bejczy 1997, 367).

28. Of course, a Sufi Sheikh achieves the zenith of the relationship with God. But such an achievement is neither possible nor necessary for everyone.

29. Also, see Cranston (1987, 109).

References

- Aflaki, Shams al-Din Ahmad. 1996. *Manaqeb al-Arefin*, vol. 2. Tehran, Iran: Dunya-I Ketab.
- Al-Tawhidi, Abi-Hayyan. 1992. *Al-Muqabasat*. Kuwayt, Kuwait: Dar al-Suad al-Sabah.
- 'Araqi, Fakhr al-Din. 2003. *Kullyyat*. Tehran, Iran: Khash'i.
- 'Attar, Farid al-Din. 2001. *Musibatnameh*. Tehran, Iran: Zavvar.
- Baqeri, Mehri. 1991. Asl-e Buda-iye Yeki az Tamsilha-ye Masnavi. *Majele-ye Daneshkade-ye Adabiyat va Ulum-e Ensani-ye Mashhad* 24 (4): 673–78.
- Bejczy, István. 1999. Toleration: A medieval concept. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (3): 365–84.
- Boyle, J. A., ed. 1968. *The Cambridge history of Iran*, vol. 5. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Clinton, Jerome W. 1999. Rumi in America. *Edebiyat* 10:149–54.
- Cranston, Maurice. 1987. John Locke and the case for toleration. In *On toleration*, ed. Susan Mendus and David Edwards, 101–121. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Este'lami, Muhammad. 2003. Rumi and the universality of his message. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14 (4): 429–34.
- Fenton, Paul B. n.d. Judaism and Sufism. In *History of Islamic philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Sadr and Oliver Leaman, vol. 1, 755–768. Tehran, Iran: Arayeh.

- Foruzanfar, Badi'zaman. 2003. *Zendegui-ye Mowlana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi Mashhour be Mowlavi*. Tehran, Iran: Zavvar.
- Fotion, Nick, and Gerard Elfstrom. 1992. *Toleration*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Ghazali, Muhammad. 2004. *Kimiya-ye Sa'adat*. Tehran, Iran: Elmi va Farhangi.
- Guggisberg, Hans R. 1983. The defense of religious toleration and religious liberty in early modern Europe: Arguments, pressures, and some consequences. *History of European Ideas* 4 (1): 35–50.
- Hofmann, Murad Wilfried. 1998. The protection of religious minorities in Islam. *Encounters* 4 (2): 137–48.
- Jackson, Sherman A., ed. 2002. *On the boundaries of theological tolerance in Islam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Jovaini, Ata Malek. 1999. *Tarikh-e Jahangusha*. Tehran, Iran: Amir Kabir.
- Kautz, Stephen. 1993. Liberalism and the idea of toleration. *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (2): 610–32.
- Khurramshahi, Baha al-Din, and Siyamak Mukhtari. 2003. *Quran and Masnavi*. Tehran, Iran: Qatreh.
- Laursen, John Christian. 2003. Irony and toleration: Lessons from the travels of Mendes Pinto. *Critical Review of International and Political Philosophy* 6 (2): 21–40.
- Laursen, John Christian, ed. 1999. *Religious Toleration: 'The Variety of Rites' from Cyrus to Defoe*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Laursen, John Christian, and Cary Nederman, eds. 1998. *Beyond the persecuting society*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lewis, Franklin D. 2003. *Rumi: Past and present, east and west. The life, teachings and poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld.
- Lorenzo, David. 2003. Tradition and prudence in Locke's exception to toleration. *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2): 248–58.
- Masroori, Cyrus. 1999. Cyrus II and the political utility of religious toleration. In *Religious toleration: "The variety of rites" from Cyrus to Defoe*, ed. John Christian Laursen, 13–37. New York: St. Martin's.
- . 2007. The conceptual obstacles to political reform in Iran. *Review of Politics* 69:171–91.
- Munavvar, Muhammad. 2002. *Asrar al-Towhid fi Maqamat al-Sheikh Abi Sa'id*, vol. 1. Tehran, Iran: Agah.
- Murphy, Andrew. 1997. Tolerance, toleration and the liberal tradition. *Polity* 29 (4): 593–623.
- Nederman, Cary. 2000. *Worlds of difference*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University.
- Pauck, Wilhelm. 1946. The Christian faith and religious tolerance. *Church History* 15 (3): 220–34.
- Razi, Najm al-Din Muhammad. 2005. *Mersad al-Ebad*. Tehran, Iran: Elmi va Farhangi.
- Rumi, Jalal al-Din Muhammad. 1983. *Kulliyat-e Shams Tabrizi*. Tehran, Iran: Amir Kabir.
- . 1995. *Masnavi*. Tehran, Iran: Javidan.
- . 2000. *Kitab Fih ma Fih*. Tehran, Iran: Amir Kabir.
- Sana'i, Abulmajid. 2001. *Hadiqat al-Hadiqeh*. Tehran, Iran: Negah.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. 1975. *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Columbia: University of South Carolina.
- Scott, David. 1995. Buddhism and Islam: Past to present encounters and interfaith lessons. *Numen* 42 (2):141–55.
- Shahidi, J'afar. 2003. *Sharh-e Masnavi*, vol. 7. Tehran, Iran: Elmi va Farhangi.
- Skinner, Quentin.1978. *The foundations of political thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sorush, Abdulkarim. 2000a. *Qumar-e 'Asheqaneh*. Tehran, Iran: Sarat.
- Sorush, Abdulkarim. 2000b. *Reason, freedom, and democracy in Islam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sultan Valad, 'Ala al-Din Muhammad. 1997. *Valadnameh*. Tehran, Iran: Nashr-e Nama.
- Tabrizi, Shams al-Din Muhammad. 1988. *Maqalat-e Shams Tabrizi*. Tehran, Iran: Kharazmi.
- Tadayun, Ataullah. n.d. *Jelvehayeh Tassavuf va Erfan dar Iran va Jahan*. Tehran, Iran: Inteharat-e Tehran.
- Tully, James, ed. 1988. *Meaning and context; Quentin Skinner and his critics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tusi, Khajeh Nizam al-Mulk. 1980. *Siasatnameh*. Tehran, Iran: Jibi.
- Walzer, Michael. 1997. *On toleration*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wilson, James Q. 2002. The reform Islam needs. *City Journal*. http://www.city-journal.org/html/12_4_the_reform-islam.html.
- Wolfson, Adam. 1997. Toleration and relativism. *Review of Politics* 59 (2): 213–31.
- Zakani, 'Ubeid. 2004. *Kulliyat-e 'Ubeid Zakani*. Tehran, Iran: Peyk-e Farhang.
- Zarrinkub, Abdulhussein. 1984. *Ba Karivan-e Andisheh*. Tehran, Iran: Amir Kabir.
- . 1990. *Justiju dar Tasavvuf Iran*. Tehran, Iran: Amir Kabir.