

HICK'S PLURALISM AND RUMI'S *MATHNAWI*:
THE CONTINUED PROPAGATION
OF MISAPPROPRIATED LINES

"The lamps are different, but the Light is the same:
it is from Beyond"

Mohamed Ajmal Abdul Razak Al-Aidrus

In the last few decades, transcendental and pluralistic ideas have come to be accepted and even promoted by scholars, including those who are Muslims. Amongst the arguments presented by proponents include the lines above quoted by John Hick over and over again which purportedly are from the great poet-saint, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi. The purpose appears to be to convince Muslims that they should not reject the notion outright or altogether or that it be viewed as strange or foreign once Rumi entertained it. None has questioned the veracity of those lines by Hick, not even those conversant in Persian. Preliminary research indicates Hick's earliest use of this line appears in the 80s. In his 1987 write-up for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, for instance, John Hick writes, "And the Muslim Sufi poet Rumi, wrote this about the different religious traditions" when introducing the couplet. As to whether the lines refer to religions is a question of interpretation and should not have been presented in this nature since Rumi did not associate it in any fashion to religious traditions. In reality, it was Nicholson who interpreted the symbol to mean religious traditions, not Rumi, and the reference given to these lines are not from the *Mathnawi*, but Nicholson's *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* which appeared in 1950, a book which was posthumously published by an equally prominent scholar and a former student, A.J. Arberry.

According to Arberry in his "Preface" to the book,

When Professor R.A. Nicholson died in August 1945, he left behind him a manuscript of 'a book of translations illustrating Sufi doctrine and experience as depicted by the greatest of Iranian mystical poets, Jalalul-Din Rumi.' The main text of the book was complete, but the introduction was unfinished. It has fallen to me to see this work through the press. In discharging this proud obligation of piety to my teacher and dearest friend I have redrafted into the present introduction most of the materials he prepared, allowing myself no liberty of personal opinion except in the two concluding paragraphs."

Since Professor Arberry did not insert any of his personal opinion in the "Introduction" to the work except in the last two paragraphs, one can safely assume that everything else in the work is that of Professor Nicholson's. However, the quotation in Arberry's "Preface" that has been set off, presumably, a statement by Nicholson, is somewhat misleading. It says that this is "a book of translations", yet it is clear that it is not. The first poem in the book entitled "Prelude" bears a footnote which reads "This is not a translation—it has not original text behind it. I wrote to please myself, but seeing that it brings together some of Rumi's characteristic ideas in a simple and compendious form, I think it may well serve as an overture to the present work." However, Nicholson wrote "to please himself" elsewhere in the work too. If the selections in this work are compared to the translations in the *Mathnawi* that appeared a decade earlier, we find that Nicholson had taken a great deal of liberty in the former. It is safe to conclude that it is not a translation; it would be more accurate to say that these are renditions of Nicholson of Rumi's poems. In other words, these are Nicholson's poems of Rumi's poems. It is akin to Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam* which cannot be seen as a translation of the *Rubaiyyat*. The quotation that is most often repeated as Rumi's by the likes of Hick is,

The lamps are different, but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond.

If thou keep looking at the lamp, thou art lost: for thence
arises the appearance of number and plurality.

Fix thy gaze upon the Light, and thou art delivered from
the dualism inherent in the finite body.

However, this quotation is from Nicholson's 1950 rendition of
Rumi's work in which this piece is entitled "One True Light", and in
this work the poem reads,

O thou who art the kernel of Existence, the disagreement
between Moslem, Zoroastrian and Jew depends on the
standpoint.

After what appears to be a caesura, the poem continues,

Some Hindus brought an elephant, which they exhibited
in a dark shed¹

As seeing it with the eye was impossible, every one felt
it with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk: he said, "This animal
is like a water-pipe."

Another touched its ear: to him the creature seemed like
a fan.

Another handled its leg and described the elephant as
having the shape of a pillar:

Another stroked its back. "Truly," said he, "this elephant
resembles a throne."

Had each of them held a lighted candle, there would
have been no contradiction in their words.

It is the quotation from this book that has found its way into
numerous works and websites, popularized by John Hick, who
claimed that it was from Maulana Rumi. In this work, the footnote
reads, "*Math.* III, 1259. Religions are many, God is One. The

¹ Please note that the story in Rumi is that of an elephant in a dark shed felt by
individuals with sight and not blind people as is always narrated.

intellect, groping in the dark, cannot form any conception of His nature. Only the clairvoyant eye of the mystic sees Him as He really is." It is here that Nicholson attributes these lines to mean different religions. In Nicholson's original translation of this couplet in the *Mathnawi*, the line is 1255 (not 1259) and the story of the elephant is separated by a subtitle, "The disagreement as to the description and shape of the elephant."

If this was truly the translation, the explanation provided in the footnote would be a viable reading or interpretation of the lines. However, the actual translated lines in the *Mathnawi* read,

This earthenware lamp and this wick are different, but
its light is not different : it is from Yonder.

If thou keep looking at the glass (lantern), thou wilt be
lost, because from the glass arise the numbers of (the
plurality inherent in) dualism;

But if thou keep thy gaze (fixed) upon the Light ,
thou wilt be delivered from dualism and the numbers
(plurality) of the finite body.

From the place (object) of view, O (thou who art the)
kernel of Existence, there arises the difference between
the true believer and the Zoroastrian and the Jew.

*The disagreement as to the description and shape of the
elephant*

The elephant was in a dark house: some Hindus had
brought it for exhibition.

In order to see it, many people were going, every one,
into that darkness.

As seeing it with the eyes was impossible, (each one)
was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk: he said, "This creature
is like a water-pipe."

The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared
to be like a fan.

Since another handled its leg, he said, "I found the

elephant's shape to be like a pillar."

Another laid his hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this elephant was like a throne."

Similarly, whenever any one heard (a description of the elephant), he understood (it only in respect of) the part that he had touched.

On account of the (diverse) place (object) of view, their statements differed: one man entitled it "*dal*," another "*alif*."

If there had been a candle in each one's hand, the difference would have gone out of their words.

It is clear from this that the translation in the actual *Mathnawi* and that which was produced later is significantly different. Amongst other things, Nicholson left out whole couplets and was not faithful to the original in his rendered version. By comparing the frequently quoted lines to the original, we see that the meaning is markedly different. The original does not discuss lamps, but an earthenware lamp and a wick—two distinct singular objects. In describing the *Light*, the original word used was not *same* but *not different*. Hence, the lines have been absolutely distorted, the meaning changed and the confusion continued and the attribution misappropriated. The original Persian lines read,

این سفال و این یلپته یلپته دیگر ست

لیک نورش نیست دیگر ز آن سرست

The words used in Persian are *یَلپته* and *سفال*.² There is no

² My preliminary reading indicates that this particular quotation does not appear in *Faith and Knowledge* (1957), *Evil and the God of Love* (1966), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), *God has Many Names* (1980), *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (1985), and *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989). However, it does appear as a quotation, set off from the text on a separate page entitled "Conclusion: Three Reflections" in *Three Faiths—One God* (1989) and as mentioned in this article, in the 1987 entry written by Hick's in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.

talk of lamps here, only of *a* lamp and *a* wick, two different objects that make up a singular thing. However, in Nicholson's rendition he turns these into lamps and says that they represent "religious traditions." It is interesting to note that in the original the subsequent line reads, "The Light is not different" and in his rendition "The light is the same." One of the most commendable characteristics of Nicholson's translation of the *Mathnawi* is that it is a faithful reading of the original. Hence, in the original here he even makes a distinction between similarly sounding terms, "not different" and "same." Something that is the same or similar would make it identical, but something that is not different would imply that it resembles a certain thing, but is not the same or similar. Hence, both the wick and the lamp produce light, but obviously the light is not the same as it is not in the case of light from the sun and the moon.³ The wick has its own light fed by the oil, which is the source for the light, but the lamp merely reflects it, and if you keep looking at the lamp, "plurality" will ensue and you "wilt be lost" because from the "glass arise the numbers of (the plurality inherent in) dualism, "But if thou keep thy gaze (fixed) upon the Light, thou wilt be delivered from dualism and the numbers (plurality) of the finite body. If Rumi's intent was not to show the difference between the light, then why should he conclude the poem by saying, "From the place (object) of view, O (thou who art the) kernel of Existence, there arises the difference between the true believer and the Zoroastrian and the Jew? One must read this to mean the difference between a true believer and the rest, that is, a comparison between the "true believer" and others, the true believer whose eyes is fixed on the light and is saved from numbers. This was what Rumi said and Nicholson translated. In Nicholson's rendition, he changes the word *true believer* to *Muslim*, which again changes the import of the meaning. In the 1950 work, Nicholson took great liberties, for whatever reason, in rendering these lines in this manner, and regrettably, this has created this confusion. If one is to examine

3 This is recurring theme in the *Mathnawi*: the magic of Moses and the magicians are not the same; the tears of a guide and the guided are not the same; the proclamation "I am God" of Firaun and Hallaj is not the same, etc.

the use of the word *pelita* and *sifal* in other parts of the *Mathnawi*, one would find that the words appear together in the *Mathnawi* in this manner:

Book I—line 2934: Although thou hast become the lighted wick and the glass (lamp), yet thou art the hearts leader (the Spiritual Guide): Thou art the end of the thread (which serves as a clue).

Book II—line 1263: Whilst this jeweled lamp is not (yet) extinguished, see you trim its wick and (supply it with) oil immediately.

line 1835: These causes are (linked together) like the physician and the sick: These causes are like the lamp and the wick.

line 1836: Twist a new wick for your night-lamp, (but) know that the lamp of the sun transcends these things.

Book III—line 4: This lamp, the sun, which is bright--it is not (made bright) by means of wick and cotton and oil.

line 1253: This earthenware lamp and this wick are different, but its light is not different: It is from Yonder.

Book IV—line 426: That lamp is (light) this body, its light like the (animal) soul: It requires a wick and this and that.

line 427: That lamp with six wicks, namely, these senses, is based entirely upon sleep and food.

Book V—none

Book VI—line 4427: (The incapable man is) like a lamp without oil or wick that gets neither much nor little from the (flaming) taper.

The lines in which one of these words appear alone or in combination with other words are,

Book I—none

Book II—none

Book III—line 3768: He was saying this, and (meanwhile) from his lips a wick (ray) of pure light was going up to Simak (Arcturus) step by step (uninterruptedly).

Book IV—line 425: At night a lamp is placed in every house, in order that by its light they (the inmates) may be delivered from darkness.

line 429: Without wick or oil it has no duration, and with wick
and oil it is also faithless (transient)

Book V—none

Book VI—line 758: (If) thou become Reason, thou wilt know
Reason perfectly: if thou become Love, thou wilt know Love's
(flaming) wick.

line 3389⁴—To seek guidance from candle and wick when the
perfect Sun is present,

The lamp, the wick, the oil and the light are important and essential symbols in Sufism. They are always used in the context of explaining the body, the soul and enlightenment; however, never always in the same manner. Even Rumi, as it is evident from the lines above, does not use them to represent the same thing in the different books, though the images are always used to represent matters pertaining to the state of the body and the soul.

How should one view this startling discovery of the erroneous attribution, not only of the idea of pluralism to Rumi, but also the lines? Even if the lines had been written by Rumi, how would one explain the numerous stories and lines in the *Mathnawi* in which Rumi questions issues such as trinity in Christianity, futile practices and questionable beliefs amongst certain sects in Islam? More importantly, how have pluralists ignored looking at the original lines of the *Mathnawi* all these years, a fundamental and basic requirement of research, and permit this error to continue? It raises questions as to whether the neglect was deliberate or accidental.

It is clear from this article that Rumi did not write these lines and that no one can conclude from them that he advocated pluralism. The lines were written by Nicholson years after he had finished

4 These lines have been quoted from the most accurate edition of the *Mathnawi* available, that is, a collection that incorporates the lines in the Appendix provided by Nicholson on the discrepancies he found in his translation of Book I through half of Book III before the Konia Manuscripts were discovered. Nicholson, Reynolds Alleyne (translator and editor). *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*. Tehran: Booteh Publications, 2001.

translating the *Mathnawi*. It is clear that it was a rendition of the original lines in the *Mathnawi*. Comparing the original Persian and the translation by Nicholson himself in the *Mathnawi* bear this out. Pluralists will have to go elsewhere to find support for their ideas and strike Rumi out from the register of pluralism. As to why this fact has gone undetected for so long raises questions of deliberate cover-up, all for the purpose of advancing an idea that is an anti-thesis to the position of the finality of the revelation of Islam and that of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Pluralism calls for compromise on fundamental tenets of religion, including affirming the importance of showing the supremacy of Islam. Islam, Muslims believe, is the final message of God. If Islam accepts pluralism, then every adherent of every religion can remain as he is and does not need to change or seek anymore. The truth of Islam to a Muslim is not subjective: it is absolute. For him it is *dīn al-haqq*. Pluralism advocates that one does not have to look for the truth because everyone is in possession of it. It is a wishful notion which dissuades a person from purpose and direction. It presents a God who is just as happy to be viewed in multiplicity or in triplicate as He is singularly. Rumi's *Mathnawi* is a book about salvation of the soul of the Muslim. He extracted materials from the Quran and hadiths and Islamic history and philosophy, amongst other lesser heady material, to express his ideas. He did not centre his book on the Bible or the Vedas. The lines in question are a complete distortion of Rumi's. The difference of opinion here is not one of interpretation. This appears to be a case of a deliberate suppression of the truth by Hick⁵ and his supporters. It is irresponsible and unethical scholarship. To attribute such a blatant untruth and to allow it to carry on this long is an unconscionable act. Rumi was a Sunni theologian-poet who embraced universal Islamic

5 Though Hick is identified as "the greatest proponent of pluralism," a philosophy which purportedly assigns an equal status to all religions, I question his position in light of his reference to Islam in his book, *Faith and Knowledge*, which was originally published in 1957 and subsequently reprinted in 1966 and 1988, where he refers to Islam as "Mohammedanism," an offensive antiquated appellation of Muslims. The quotation reads, "All sorts of accidental circumstances may

ideals, but this embrace did not extend to the philosophical notion of Hick's pluralism. The white light of Rumi is singular and bright and admits no corruption. It is unadulterated in any form or fashion and cannot be likened to the fading glow of blackened ambers that lost its luster eons ago.

predispose us toward a proposition; the mere fact that it is widely held in the society around us is often sufficient. For a Chinese, Confucianism (or rather, today, Communism) tends to be a live option; for an Arab, Mohammedanism; and for a Briton or an American, Christianity: an each religion to the exclusion of others" (43). If anything, the quotation tells us that at one point in time, Hick did, if he does not now, entertain the derogatory term "Mohammedanism," a term used by Christians to deny the purity and legitimacy of Islam, implying that the religion was an invention of Muhammad.