

# A Ruminatiion on the ‘Laziest Son’

By [Scott Horton](#) (In Harper’s Magazine, October 18, 2007)

If we had to craft a list of the ten greatest poets of human history, then certainly this thirteenth-century Muslim theologian, who began his life in modern day Afghanistan and ended it in what later became Turkey, would have an assured position on the list. And as for universality—what better measure than the fact that in 2004, Rumi ranked in surveys as the best read poet in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and, thanks to the brilliant translations of Coleman Barks, the United States. As with any Rumi poem, this one has many layers of meaning to it. But here’s my understanding.

Like Boccaccio’s ring story in the *Decameron* (the third from the cycle of the first day) or Lessing’s parable from *Nathan the Wise* (act 3, scene 4)—this choice of virtue among three sons should be immediately understood (and certainly would have been understood by a contemporary of Rumi’s) this way: which of the three faiths “of the Book” is the true faith? The father is, of course, the God of the Book, and the sons, “tall like Cypresses,” are Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Rumi echoes that in the follow-on (“Not Christian, Jew or Muslim...”) And to this question Rumi offers several answers, mostly laden with irony. He tells us that professed belief counts for little, particularly if not sincerely held. “I can know a man by his voice,” says the eldest son, who is promptly ejected from the contest. (But compare this with the wiser man—as Rumi reminds us, the clay pot must be tapped to test for a crack; the buyer who relies on the outward appearance alone is a fool). And, like Boccaccio and Lessing, he says that it is our conduct that matters and must ultimately provide the basis for a judgment.

But on this point the irony of a Sufi mystic kicks in. For conduct, Rumi takes “laziness,” for which here I see the introspective process of truth-seeking that is Rumi’s hallmark, and that of the Mevlevi Brotherhood which he helped define. It involves discipline and rigor (“disciplined silence”), but to the uninitiated it must, of course, seem nothing but “laziness.” (“Mystics are experts in laziness.”) Can you hear the laughter? Rumi mocks himself, or at least, shows that he has a sense of humor.

Importantly, Rumi warns us against demonization of the outsider, of the nonbeliever (the “boogeyman,” who, he reminds us through the voice of a child, “has a mother, too.”) The man who distinguishes among his species on the basis of outward labels (claims to be Muslim, Christian or Jew, for instance), is a fool. What counts is not this profession of faith but the conduct and the content of the character of the individual. And conversely, those who draw distinctions through the species on the basis of these labels are fools, for the real truth-seekers can be found in each community.

But back to our question. Who is the chosen son? In the end we learn that it is “the youngest son,” and the youngest of the three faiths is, of course, Islam. But this is not Rumi’s ultimate meaning. The true answer is to point to the false premise of the question. The answer lies in what unites, not in what divides humankind—what ties humans one to another and to the world in which they live. A Sufi faithful would know this as the doctrine of the oneness of God, *tauhid*. Hence, the right answer: “there’s a window open/ Between us, mixing the night air of our beings.” Those who are driven by differentiation and false pride for their religious choice—whatever the religious choice—have failed the test in the most miserable way.

And on this point, Rumi, Boccaccio and Lessing—the Muslim, the Catholic, and the Protestant who launched the drive for the emancipation of Europe’s Jews—see things very much eye-to-eye. But their message is a vital one for our day. We live in an age in which thoughts of crusaders and caliphates have been resurrected for shameful and blood-drenched purposes. This must be overcome with urgency.

In our day the Middle East is riven with bloodshed and violence, and the immediate prospects before us are for more violence still. Against this we must strive to remember Rumi’s message: a plea for tolerance, compassion and respect for the ties that bind humankind. The land in which Rumi once walked spans the present zone of conflict—from his native city of Balkh in Afghanistan to his final home in Anatolian Konya. This land is in great need of Rumi’s vision and compassion. And that is no less true for the United States, where the poison of religious bigotry seeps ever closer to the groundwater. I hope we all can find that way “between voice and presence” of which Rumi writes. We need it badly. “With disciplined silence it opens/ With wandering talk it closes.” Rumi wants us to make one resolve: to find the tools to keep that window open. There is nothing that humanity requires more urgently than this.

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