

Can Rumi save us now?

Life and words of the popular 13th-century Persian poet have special meaning for a 21st-century world torn by war, genocide and hatred

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During the last decades of his life, the Persian poet Rumi was surrounded by news of terrorism, just as we are eight centuries later. Those were the days of Mongol invasions that swept past the steppes of Asia into Anatolia, the Near East and other areas of geographical importance. Mass murders from war -- what today would be called genocide and ethnic cleansing -- were a routine part of Rumi's 13th-century world.

So, where's the bloodshed in Rumi's writing? Where are all the parables about gore and conflict and Mongol atrocities?

Nowhere, really, say Rumi scholars, pinpointing a central incongruity to the poet's life: Rumi, a man so advanced in Islamic training that he could issue fatwas, divorced himself from talk of revenge, retribution and eye-for-an-eye killings. Like Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Rumi insisted violence was an unsatisfying way of resolving issues. In fact, Rumi believed people could find salvation in their enemies' hatred.

"Every enemy is your medicine ... your beneficial alchemy and heart healing," Rumi says in his epic six-volume work, the Mathnavi, as translated by Majid Naini, an Iranian American scholar. "Carry the burden smilingly and cheerfully, because patience is the key to victory."

Sentiments like that have turned Rumi into one of America's best-selling poets -- someone whose thoughts on love and other matters are revered by hundreds of thousands of readers. Rumi had already found an audience in America before 9/11, but interest in the mystic from Persia (now Iran) -- and in his beautiful words; in his sometimes funny stories; in his all-inclusive message that the faithful of all religions have a common humanity -- has mushroomed in the past six years. In recognizing this year as the 800th anniversary of Rumi's birth, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which is known as UNESCO, calls Rumi an "eminent philosopher and mystical poet of Islam" whose "work and thought remain universally relevant today."

Scores of concerts and events will mark the anniversary, including a celebration on Thursday and Friday in San Francisco that features Coleman Barks, the retired University of Georgia professor widely credited with popularizing Rumi in the United States.

Go to Borders, Barnes & Noble or any neighborhood bookstore, and you're likely to find many more Rumi titles than books by Robert Frost or Walt Whitman. Besides poetry shelves, Rumi is prominent in bookstores' calendar, religious and music sections. Rumi's words -- lyrical and resonant, especially when voiced in Persian -- lend themselves perfectly to musical expression. Charles Lloyd, the brilliant saxophonist who played with Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy in the 1960s, is among the jazz artists who've recently paid musical tribute to Rumi.

So, who is Rumi, really? He was a mystic and a scholar. He was an adherent of religious Islam (his full name was Jalal al-Din Muhammad Balkhi) who did the hajj to Mecca, but who, in the later part of his life, famously said, "I am not a Jew nor a Christian, not a Zoroastrian nor a Moslem." By that, says Naini, Rumi meant that his faith in God, in Allah, knew no boundaries -- that it didn't matter what country he lived in, or what official religion he designated, because the love and longing that Rumi felt was everywhere, including his soul.

"Keep in mind that the holy Quran states there is no force in religion," says Naini, a Rumi expert who has lectured on the poet at the United Nations. "Rumi wants to remind us that we are all children and the creation of God, regardless of religion, race, color, nationality, etc."

Born on Sept. 30, 1207, in what is today the area of Balkh, Afghanistan, Rumi might have been a religious cleric all his life were it not for Shams of Tabriz, a wandering dervish whom Rumi met at age 38. As chronicled in Naini's book, "Mysteries of the Universe and Rumi's Discoveries on the Majestic Path of Love," Tabriz challenged Rumi's perspective by asking him if the mystic Bayazid Baastami was "higher" in stature than the Muslim Prophet Muhammad. By confronting Rumi in a public space, and daring to compare Bayazid and Muhammad, Shams unnerved Rumi, who encountered someone unafraid to make a spectacle and question religious orthodoxy.

Out of that first meeting in Konya, Turkey, Rumi and Shams became inseparable. Shams was at least 20 years older than Rumi, and untrained in strict Islamic theology, yet Rumi -- who was the highest Muslim authority in Konya -- chose Shams to be his mentor. As noted by Naini, Shams asked Rumi to relinquish himself from the trappings of his fame and fortune, and to focus just on an unadorned, selfless connection to God. To "disconnect from the world of desires and dependencies," as Naini notes, and to enter into a higher spiritual devotion to the Almighty, Rumi followed Shams' advice to perform a whirling dance called Samaa, and to listen to mystical music performed on a reed flute. (Rumi practiced the Samaa on an empty stomach, says Naini.) Islamic traditionalists considered Rumi's new actions heretical.

Seven centuries later, some Muslim fundamentalists still say the movement that Rumi spawned -- the Mevlevi, also known as the Whirling Dervishes -- is un-Islamic because of its emphasis on public song and dance. But Naini and other scholars rebut that, saying Rumi and his followers are emblematic of Islam's Sufi tradition, which emphasizes a mystical closeness to God, and to other humans, regardless of their faith. It's this universality that appeals to Rumi's readers and accounts for the still-growing interest in Rumi's work.

Westerners who may be otherwise afraid of Islam see in Rumi and the Mevlevi a form of the religion that features dancing, music and talk of brotherly and sisterly fellowship. They see someone from Persia who turned his back on hatred and revenge. In the current climate of war and warmongering, Rumi left behind volumes of work that have gained relevance as time has passed.

Rumi didn't try to sugarcoat his life or the lives of others. After Shams mysteriously disappeared, Rumi felt sorrow for many years. His stories of trying to retain a closeness to God through love and loss are at the heart of his writing.

In "Mysteries of the Universe," Naini emphasizes Rumi's thoughtfulness on science, music, and nature, but Rumi's biggest gift to readers today may be his emphasis on the power of love and tolerance.

"Rumi said, 'From love, thorns become flowers,' " Naini says. "Rumi teaches that even if the Devil falls in love, he becomes something like (the angel) Gabriel, and that evilness dies within him."

The Rumi Concert, sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, takes place at 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco. For more information, visit www.ciis.edu/publicprograms/spring07/rumi_concert.html. E-mail Jonathan Curiel at jcuriel@sfchronicle.com.

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