

The City of the Heart: Yūnus Emre's Verses of Wisdom and Love

Translated by Süha Faiz, Preface by John D. Norton

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“The Beloved is made manifest in colours multitudinous—
But one is His accent which a hundred thousand hearts with joy has filled.”

—*Yūnus Emre*

Yūnus Emre (1238-1320) was a Turkish poet and Sufi mystic who had a great deal of influence on Turkish literature that continues into the present day. His sublime verses expound on the transcendent love that pervades the unity of existence, a hallmark of Islamic spirituality, and his message expresses the universal and timeless wisdom found across all the world's religions. Each of his poems is filled with esoteric knowledge. Those who do not understand their transcendent symbolism can nonetheless appreciate and benefit from reading them, while the cognoscenti will be able to access their deeper meaning. Yūnus Emre was both universal in his outlook and deeply steeped in the tradition of Islam, holding the Holy Qur'ān to be the foundation of his – and all – knowledge. Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003), a leading expert on Islamic literature and mysticism, emphasizes this point, stating “In the

case of Yūnus Emre, one cannot possibly deny the orthodox Islamic foundation of all his thought, although some modern Turkish interpreters are inclined to forget the Islamic roots of his poetry. The Qur'ān is for him the basis of all wisdom".¹

Yūnus's mystical verses are reminiscent of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207-1273) or as he is known within the world of Islamic spirituality, Rūmī or simply Mawlānā (also Mevlana), "our Master". It is possible that these two illustrious figures met and it has been pointed out that Yūnus was familiar with Rūmī's work. Some suggest that the following couplet is a reference to such a meeting:

Since when our master, Sovereign Lord, bestowed his loving grace on us,
That look of beauty has become for us the mirror of our hearts.

Although there is no historical evidence that Yūnus was Rūmī's disciple, he affirms that Taptūk was his spiritual guide (*Shaykh*):

And in those lands to which we came, bearing in our hearts delight,
We spread abroad to all the message of Taptūk, praise be to God.

We were a servant in the hearth and doorway of Taptūk's abode;
Poor Yūnus, then raw flesh, has now been made true food, praise be to God.

And he refers to his guide as his Beloved, for example, in the phrase, "Taptūk image of the Friend." Yūnus did not found a Sufi Order, and in one of his verses he counsels himself to "Found not a dervish home, O Yūnus, thinking that more ears will hear".

Sūha Faiz a Turk himself and from Cyprus, speaks to his intention behind the present translation of Yūnus Emre's work, "My endeavour in making this translation has been to produce an English text which departs as little as possible from the sense, spirit, and structure of the original Turkish; to achieve the practically impossible aim of enabling English readers to feel that they are hearing the original author speaking to them across the years."

A key hallmark of Yūnus's writings is its universality, an "esoteric

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, "Yūnus Emre," in *Yūnus Emre and His Mystical Poetry*, ed. Talāt Said Halman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 65.

ecumenicism”² that transcends sectarian boundaries and echoes the Qur’ānic verse “neither of the East nor of the West” (24:5). The poems point to the idea of one Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) which is clothed in myriad forms:

A breath—and it, within the mosque, in reverent prayer prostrates itself;
A breath—and, Bible pages reading, it becomes a cloistered monk.

He provides numerous allusions to the esoteric or inner dimensions of religion in his work, which itself extends beyond the exoteric forms of religion. Yūnus writes,

Not in Mecca is our trust, nor yet in mosque or formal prayer;
In Truth, in silent Truth, we pray unceasing to that Truth alone.

In keeping with Islam as an affirmation of earlier revealed Truth, Yūnus’s universality embraces, for instance, all the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*):

The Jewish Torah and the Christian Book, the Psalms and the Koran,
The message which they each proclaim, we found in all that truly is.³

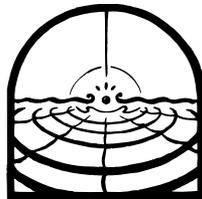
The Beloved can be found anywhere, and is all that truly exists: “For where you want Him, there, we found, is God—in all that truly is.” For him, allegiance to the Beloved is beyond mere outward religious affiliation; it is to the esoteric Reality, the inner dimension of faith:

Religion, faith, for me is He: were I without Him in this world
No idol would I worship, nor the Cross—to no faith would I hold.

² See Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism*, trans. Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1985)

³ These verses are reminiscent of Ibn ‘Arabī and Rūmī: “My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, / And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka’ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran. / I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, quoted in *The Tarjumān al-Asbwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson [London, UK: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911], p. 67); “I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr [Parsi], nor Moslem. I am not of the East, nor of the West, nor of the land, nor of the sea. . . . I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one; One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call. *He is the first, He is the last, He is the outward, He is the inward.*” (Rūmī, “Poem - XXXL,” quoted in *Selected Poems from the Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1889], pp. 125, 127).

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