



## The Light of Unity: Mystical Parallels in the Message of Rumi and Jesus

### Birliğin Işığı: Rumi ve İsa'nın Mesajlarındaki Mistik Benzerlikler

Neil Watson<sup>1</sup>

Email: [neilwatson7@hotmail.com](mailto:neilwatson7@hotmail.com)

Orcid No: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1730-8129>

#### ABSTRACT

This study explores the convergences between the mystical teachings of Rumi and Jesus Christ as reflected in Sufi poetry, Gospel narratives, and Christian ascetic writings. Through a comparative analysis of symbolic imagery, archetypal motifs, and spiritual practices, the article argues that both figures articulate a shared mystical language centered on Divine Love, inner transformation, and the dissolution of the ego.

Special attention is given to key motifs such as the 'inner Christ' in Rumi's poetry, being a symbol of mystical awakening of the soul, and the concept of 'fanā' (ego dissolution), which parallels the Christian theory of 'the death of the self', and the archetype of the 'Lover', which unites both traditions in their yearning for Union with the Absolute. The article analyses such metaphors as 'walking on water', 'Jesus' breath' and the image of Mary giving birth to Christ via Divine Intervention, within each person, as found in both Rumi's mystical verses and Christian ascetic writings.

By analysing the images, symbols, and spiritual practices found in Sufi poetry and Christian ascetic writings, this study demonstrates that Rumi and Jesus Christ convey a shared mystical language accessible to all spiritual seekers, transcending doctrinal and dogmatic boundaries. This comparative examination highlights common themes such as *fanā* (self-annihilation), the Inner Christ, sacred breath, walking on water, parables, and other archetypal motifs, revealing a universal grammar of spiritual experience. By identifying these parallels, the research contributes to greater tolerance, mutual understanding, and the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, offering a more integrated perspective on the universal pathways of inner transformation and unity through Divine Love.

**Keywords:** Rumi; Jesus Christ; mysticism; Sufism; Christianity; comparative theology; Islamic Christology; spiritual transformation.

#### ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Sufi şiirinde, İncil anlatılarında ve Hristiyan çileci yazılarında yansıdığı şekliyle Rumi ve İsa Mesih'in mistik öğretileri arasındaki yakınlaşmaları inceliyor. Sembolik imgelerin, arketipsel motiflerin ve manevi uygulamaların karşılaştırmalı analizi yoluyla, makale, her iki figürün de İlahi Aşk, içsel dönüşüm ve egonun çözülmesine odaklanan ortak bir mistik dili dile getirdiğini savunmaktadır.

Rumi'nin şiirindeki ruhun mistik uyanışının sembolü olan 'içsel Mesih' ve Hristiyan 'benliğin ölümü' teorisine paralel olan 'fanā' (ego çözülmesi) kavramı ile her iki geleneği de Mutlak ile Birleşme özleminde birleştiren 'Aşık' arketipi gibi temel motiflere özel önem verilmektedir. Bu makale, Rumi'nin mistik dizelerinde ve Hristiyan çileci yazılarında bulunan "suyun üzerinde yürümek", "İsa'nın nefesi" ve

<sup>1</sup> Royal Society of Arts (RSA), London, UK



Meryem'in İlahi Müdahale yoluyla İsa'yı doğurması gibi metaforları her bir kişinin içinde analiz etmektedir.

Sufi şiirinde ve Hristiyan çileci yazılarında bulunan imgeleri, sembolleri ve manevi uygulamaları analiz ederek, bu çalışma Rumi ve İsa Mesih'in, doktrinsel ve dogmatik sınırları aşan, tüm manevi arayış içinde olanlara erişilebilir ortak bir mistik dil aktardığını göstermektedir. Bu karşılaştırmalı inceleme, fanā (kendini yok etme), İçsel Mesih, kutsal nefes, suyun üzerinde yürümek, benzetmeler ve diğer arketipsel motifler gibi ortak temaları vurgulayarak, manevi deneyimin evrensel bir gramerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu paralellikleri belirleyerek, araştırma daha fazla hoşgörüyü, karşılıklı anlayışa ve dinler arası ve kültürler arası diyalogun teşvikine katkıda bulunmakta, İlahi Sevgi yoluyla içsel dönüşüm ve birliğin evrensel yollarına daha bütünleşik bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rumi; İsa Mesih; mistisizm; Sufizm; Hristiyanlık; karşılaştırmalı teoloji; İslami Hristoloji; manevi dönüşüm.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's spiritual landscape, despite the apparent diversity of traditions, seekers are increasingly being drawn to archetypal structures that transcend religious and mystical teachings. Amidst growing cultural fragmentation, the superficiality of modern spirituality, and the estrangement between Eastern and Western traditions, a comparative analysis of symbolic systems that reveals the universal laws of inner transformation have become especially relevant. One particularly rich dialogue lies in the mystical and poetic heritage of Jalal al-Din Rumi and the Christian tradition centered on Jesus Christ.

Despite the differences in their cultural and religious contexts, Rumi's poetry and the Gospel narrative of Jesus converge in their depiction of essential stages of the inner path: ego dissolution (fanā'), the birth of the Inner Christ, walking on water as a symbol of faith, divine breath as the soul's revivification, love as a purifying force and healing as spiritual transfiguration. These images do not merely overlap, as they form a shared mystical lexicon that articulates the deep principles of spiritual evolution, transcending creed, language and historical milieu.

As a 13th-century Sufi poet, Rumi was writing at the intersection of Islamic, Christian, Neoplatonic and Judaic thought. His poetry is filled with symbolic allusions to Gospel themes, interpreted through the lens of Sufi allegory. He does not merely speak of outer religion, but of existential mystery, including the birth of Jesus within the soul of each person who passes through suffering, humility, and inner purification. For Rumi, the image of the 'Inner Christ' is not merely a symbol of religious affiliation, but an embodiment of the soul's deepest potential for love, sacrifice and illumination.

From the Christian perspective, the tradition offers equally powerful archetypal forms for any seeker of truth: the death of the self, resurrection of the soul, breath of the Spirit and crossing the waters of fear, all of which reflect an inner alchemy, speaking the language of the heart and spirit. Most importantly, in both Christianity and Rumi's path, the journey toward the Divine unfolds, not through outward force, but through radical inner transformation.

My objective is to explore the intersection of Sufi poetry and Christian mysticism in their symbolic, archetypal, and transformative dimensions. This study examines how the Sufi concept of *fanā'* can be compared to the Christian notion of "dying for God," how the motif of the "breath of Jesus" functions within Sufi mystical practice as a symbol of spiritual healing and divine presence, how the image of



walking on water operates as a metaphor for faith and transcendence, and how divine love serves as a universal language mediating the union between the soul and the Absolute.

In a contemporary context increasingly attentive to interfaith dialogue and spiritual pluralism, this study contributes to the field of comparative religious hermeneutics by identifying structural and symbolic convergences between Sufi and Christian mystical traditions. Rather than positioning Rumi and Christ in opposition, the analysis demonstrates how their respective symbolic systems articulate analogous patterns of inner transformation. By examining these parallels, the article expands scholarly understanding of shared mystical lexicons whilst remaining within a descriptive and analytical framework that avoids doctrinal or prescriptive claims.

### ***The Mystical Image of the Inner Christ and Fanā'***

Rumi repeatedly emphasised the symbolic interiorisation of sacred figures, writing: “The body is Mary, and within each of us is Jesus.” In his poetry, the inner “birth of Jesus” represents the moment of spiritual transformation, often precipitated by suffering: “When the pain of childbirth reaches us, our Jesus is born.” This imagery resonates with the well-known Sufi maxim “*Die before you die*” (*mutū qabla an tamūtū*), a saying attributed to the Islamic tradition and central to the doctrine of *fanā'*, the annihilation of the ego prior to physical death.

While Christian scripture speaks of “dying to the self” (cf. Galatians 2:20; Romans 6:6), the specific formulation “Die before you die” is rooted in Islamic spirituality. The conceptual parallel, however, underscores a shared mystical anthropology in which ego-dissolution becomes the precondition for spiritual rebirth. The concept of *fanā'* may be placed in comparative dialogue with the Pauline formulation “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Although emerging from distinct theological frameworks, both expressions symbolise a state of radical inner transformation in which the autonomous ego is relinquished and reoriented toward divine presence. In Sufi metaphysics, *fanā'* denotes the annihilation of the self in God, followed by *baqā'* (subsistence in God). However, in Pauline theology the indwelling of Christ signifies participation in a renewed spiritual life. The parallel, therefore, should not be read as doctrinal equivalence but as a structural resonance within mystical anthropology.

‘Isā Masih’ literally means ‘Jesus the Messiah’ in Arabic. It is imperative to stress that in Islamic theology, ‘Isā al-Masīḥ’ literally means “Jesus the Messiah,” and he occupies a distinctive position among the prophets. The Qur’an affirms the virginal conception of Jesus (Qur’an 3:45–47; 19:16–21), presenting Mary (Maryam) as a figure of exceptional purity; notably, she is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur’an and lends her name to Sūrat Maryam (Chapter 19). The Qur’anic account of creation further describes God as breathing His spirit into Adam (15:29; 38:72), a motif that later Sufi interpretation associates symbolically with the spiritual vitality embodied in Jesus, who is also referred to in Islamic tradition as *Rūḥ Allāh* (“Spirit of God”).

Within the broader prophetic typology of Islam, where Abraham is known as *Khalīl Allāh* (Friend of God) and Moses as *Kalīm Allāh* (the one who spoke with God), these honorific titles express distinct modes of divine proximity. In this context, the designation of Jesus as *Rūḥ Allāh* acquires particular theological significance, emphasising his association with spirit and divine breath. For Sufi authors, including Rumi, this symbolism becomes interiorised: the “breath” is not merely a historical miracle, but a metaphysical principle of spiritual awakening. Thus, the Qur’anic language provides the symbolic



framework within which Rumi can speak of the inner birth of Jesus as an archetype of transformation, rather than as a purely doctrinal Christological claim.

In Book III of the *Masnawi* (lines 3702–3790), Rumi revisits the narrative of the virginal conception of Jesus, describing how God sent the Holy Spirit and appeared to Mary “in the form of a well-proportioned man,” to which Mary responds, “I seek refuge in God.” Whilst this episode corresponds to the Qur’anic account (Qur’an 19:17–18), Rumi’s treatment of the scene is primarily allegorical rather than historical.

In Christian theology, the virgin birth functions as a foundational Christological doctrine, affirming both the divine origin and unique incarnation of Christ within a historical framework. In Rumi’s mystical poetics, however, the narrative operates symbolically: Mary represents the purified soul, the Holy Spirit signifies divine inspiration, and the birth of Jesus becomes an inner event of spiritual awakening.

Thus, the comparison does not imply theological equivalence, but reveals a functional difference alongside symbolic similarity. What is a dogmatic affirmation in Christianity becomes, in Rumi’s hermeneutics, an archetype of interior transformation. Recognition of this distinction allows for a more nuanced comparative analysis that respects doctrinal boundaries whilst exploring shared symbolic structures.

#### **Rumi then continues:**

The Holy Spirit said to Mary:

Oh, the exemplar of charity!

Don’t fear me!

I am the trusted one sent by the Divine.

Don’t hide yourself from me.

I am your dignity and honour!

Don’t hide yourself from me,

I am your comfort and confidant.

As the Holy Spirit uttered these words

The rays of pure light sprang from his lips

And shone upon the stars of the sky.

The Holy Spirit continued:

Oh Mary, how can you escape



from my presence to non-existence?

I am the king of non-existence

and I possess all of knowledge.

My very foundation and my seat is non-existence.

What is present before you is only an image of me.

Oh Mary! Look at me. I am an image hard to come by

I am the crescent you see up in the sky

I am the image within your heart.

When such image as this settles in your heart

Wherever you go, it is within you.

This is not the delusion of a false daylight

That appears and disappears before the morning.

I am the genuine light at dawn

And the darkness of night never

gathers around my daylight.

### ***Walking on Water: Faith and Liberation from Fear***

Rumi uses the image of 'walking on water' as a metaphor for rising above material fears and spiritual inertia. He contrasts our ordinary life of 'walking on dry land' with the spiritual liberation of 'walking on water.' In the Gospels, the image is further transformed: the apostle Peter steps onto the water, safeguarded by faith, yet begins to sink when he loses trust. This reflects a profound truth, where faith can elevate the soul, but its loss brings us back to fear and frailty.

In the *Masnawi* (Book I, lines 570–572), Rumi draws an explicit parallel:

Walking on dry land may be understood as representing the exoteric, outward dimension of ordinary life, whereas Jesus' walking on water symbolises the esoteric, inner journey of the soul. Faith, in this context, is transmuted into more than mere belief; it becomes a mystical capacity to move beyond the gravitational pull of fear and toward trust in the unseen.



### ***The Breath of Jesus: Nafas as a Source of Spiritual Healing***

In Sufi tradition, the term ‘nafas’ means ‘breath’, and this carries profound spiritual and metaphysical significance. This is not merely a physical function, but a manifestation of divine presence within the human being, being a channel through which the sanctification and transformation of the soul occur.

In Sufi anthropology, breath is viewed as the ‘life-giving spirit’ that God breathed into Adam. The Qur’an says: “When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him.” (Qur’an 15:29)

Nafas, in this sense, is a hidden internal divine spark. Spiritual practices like dhikr, silent meditation, and conscious breathing help purify nafas from the ego’s impurities (nafs), restoring this to its primordial purity.

Sufi master Ibn Arabi described ‘the Breath of the Merciful’ (nafas al-Rahman) as the creative force through which God breathes love into the cosmos.

In Eastern Christian mysticism, breath also holds deep spiritual resonance. The Gospel of St. John (20:22) states: “He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

This gesture, where Jesus breathes upon his disciples, is strikingly close to the Sufi view of nafas as the bearer of divine grace and healing.

Moreover, in Orthodox Christian mysticism (e.g., Simeon the New Theologian), the concept of ‘spiritual breath’ is linked to prayerful attention, repentance and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In both traditions, breath serves as a medium of inner healing:

- In Sufism: through dhikr, intentional breathwork, and immersion in the divine presence;
- In Christianity: through the Jesus Prayer, synchronised with breath:
  - “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” is prayed in rhythm with inhalation and exhalation.

This practice could be correctly called ‘the breath of Jesus’ – not just metaphorically, but literally: this breath is filled with the divine name, capable of purifying the heart, healing the soul, leading to theosis (divinisation).

We may therefore understand that ‘the breath of Jesus’ is, in fact, a multi-layered symbol: uniting Sufi and Eastern Christian mysticism in understanding breath as the conduit of Divine Grace, which is an act of healing that returns the soul to its source. In both paths, breath is love descending into the human being, leading towards an encounter with the Divine within.

### ***Love as the Mystical Force of Purification***

Love is central to both traditions as the path of transformation. Rumi writes that: “In the fire of love, the ego burns – and only then does the soul become pure.” (*Masnawi*, Book IV:1832)



He also reminds us that: “Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers that you have built within yourself against it.”

In the Christian tradition, God is Love (1 John 4:8), and the practice of repentance and humility leads towards a ‘purified heart’, which is a necessary condition for encountering the Divine.

As Juan Cole notes, this inner process is seen as the transformation of the soul’s condition through suffering. Rumi bridged East and West and received an education deeply rooted in the Islamic, Christian, and Neoplatonic traditions.

Christian motifs, particularly those related to Mary and the birth of Christ, are woven into the *Masnawi* as allegories of the individual spiritual path, representing the emergence of the true self through suffering and spiritual transfiguration.

His profound grasp of Christianity is especially visible in his view of Jesus as a symbol of divine healing and spiritual fatherhood. For example, he writes that: “The miracle of Jesus is himself, not what he said or did.” (The Rumi Collection, 1998, pp. 126–138).

This emphasises the inner essence of Christ as the mirror of divine love, rather than his outward acts.

### ***Konya: A Crossroads of Religious Imagery***

In the multicultural and interreligious environment of 13th-century Konya, Rumi absorbed Christian imagery and reinterpreted it through the lens of Sufism. The city hosted Greek Orthodox communities, Armenian and Afschar Christians, and monastic presences, providing direct and indirect exposure to Christian rituals and narratives. Contemporary biographical sources, notably Aflaki’s *Manaqib al-‘Arifin*, document Rumi’s interactions with Christian monks and his familiarity with their devotional practices.

As Alan Williams observes: “Jesus is the most frequently mentioned biblical figure in the *Masnawi*, but he is presented as an inner experience, not as a dogmatic symbol” (The Philosophy of Ecstasy, 2014, pp. 199–227). For Rumi, love functions as the “surgery of the soul,” a metaphor grounded in Sufi mystical thought, where the mystic assumes simultaneously the roles of patient and healer through union with the Divine.

## **CONCLUSION**

The mystical parallels between Rumi’s poetry and the message of Jesus Christ reveal profound structural and symbolic correspondences between spiritual traditions, despite their apparent doctrinal differences. Concepts such as the “inner Christ,” *fanā’* as the dissolution of the ego, the motif of “walking on water” as a metaphor for faith, the “divine breath” as an agent of spiritual awakening, and love as a universal principle of purification collectively point towards an archetypal framework underlying the path of inner transformation.

This convergence of symbolic motifs between Sufism and Christianity enhances scholarly understanding of both traditions and provides a basis for intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics. The analysis demonstrates that, beyond religious formulations, dogma, and historical boundaries, there exists a shared symbolic language of the spirit, articulated through imagery, suffering, love, and transformative processes, which can be apprehended by seekers from diverse backgrounds.



Importantly, Rumi's universality emerges from a specific historical and Islamic context. As a 13th-century Persian-speaking Muslim sufi residing in Konya, Rumi's thought was deeply embedded in Qur'anic exegesis, Islamic mystical philosophy, and the ethical frameworks of Sunni Islam. Recognising this grounding ensures that his symbolic and allegorical use of Christian motifs, together with his philosophical innovations, are interpreted in relation to his authentic religious milieu rather than abstracted into a purely universalist figure. Christian imagery in the *Masnawi* functions primarily as a symbolic vehicle for spiritual experience, illustrating archetypal patterns of inner transformation rather than serving as dogmatic or cultic reference.

In the contemporary global context, where religion is frequently politicised or polarising, comparative study of mystical dimensions, such as those expressed in the works of Rumi and Jesus, highlights the potential for symbolic and ethical resonance across traditions. Rumi's poetry demonstrates how motifs drawn from multiple religious contexts can cohere into a coherent framework of personal and collective transformation, whilst remaining rooted in a historically and theologically specific Islamic vision.

Thus, the study underscores a functional convergence: while doctrinal and historical particulars differ, both traditions offer symbolic models for ego-transcendence, the cultivation of love, and the realisation of spiritual union. The *Masnawi* exemplifies how allegorical and mystical representation can articulate a universal language of the spirit, providing a rigorous and nuanced lens for comparative hermeneutics and interfaith scholarship.

#### REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor W. *Philosophy of New Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949, pp. 32–46.

Aflaki, 'Attar. *Manaqib al-'Ārifīn*. Tehran: Negah Publications, 2007.

Amrakhova, T. "Mugham as a Model of Cosmic Order." *Musiqi Dünyası*, 2015, №2, pp. 14–21.

Ali-Zadeh, Frangiz. *Selected Works on Azerbaijani Music*. Baku: East-West Publications, 1979.

Cole, Juan. "Rumi on the Nativity and the Christ Within: Reflections on Sufi and Christian Symbolism." *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 2018, pp. 45–62.

Helminski, Kabir, ed. *The Rumi Collection*. Boston: Shambhala, 1998. Chapter XIII, "The Only One," pp. 126–138.

International Qur'anic Studies Association (IQSA), ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Khan, Ahmed. "Fanā' and Baqā' in the *Masnawi*: Self-Annihilation and Subsistence in God." *Journal of*

Schwartz, Elliott. *Arvo Pärt: Sacred Minimalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 23–41.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979, pp. 7–19.



Mawlānā Jalāluddīn Muhammad Balkhī. *Masnawī-i Ma 'nawī*. 7 vols. Edited by Muhammad Estelāmi. Tehran: Ghalam Publishers, 1996, Book IV:1832.

McGinn, Bernard. *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. Vols. I–IV. New York: Crossroad, 1991–2012.

Nettl, Bruno. *The Study of Ethnomusicology*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005, pp. 89–102.

Stokes, Martin. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford: Berg, 1994, pp. 10–25.

Rashid, Zahra. "Towards an Ontology of Breath in Islamic Mysticism." *Journal of Islamic Mystical Studies*, 2021, pp. 142–161.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978, pp. 1–15.

Sorkhabi, Roya. "Jesus Christ in Rumi's Poetry: A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Comparative Theology*, 2022, pp. 77–99.

*Sufi Studies*, 2021, pp. 113–128

The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation & Commentary. Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Lahore: Shaik Muhammad Ashraf, 1968.

Williams, Alan. *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Inner Christ*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014, pp. 199–227.