The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Rûzbehân Baqlî

Carl W. Ernst

The imagery of birds and flight has long been a universal symbol of the ascension of the human soul to a higher reality. From the winged deities of the ancient Near East to the angels of the Bible and the winged souls of Plato’s Phædrus, poets and prophets have depicted the power of the wing to lift the soul through flight to paradise. Among non-scriptural peoples, it is especially in the complex of Central Asian and Siberian religious practices called “shamanistic” that the symbolism of flight is powerfully displayed. In the Islamic tradition, notable early explorations of the symbolism of birds and flight can be found in the writings of philosophers, Sufis, and poets such as Ibn Sinâ (d. 420/1030), al-Ghazâlî (d. 504/1111), Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191), Khâqânî (d. 595/1199), and above all in the great mystical epic of Farid al-Dîn ‘Aṭâ’î (d. ca. 617/1220), Marâya al-mawârîn or The Language of the Birds. But if we think in terms of Persian Sufism, one author in particular claims our attention for his extensive use of the symbolism of birds and flight. This is Rûzbehân Baqlî (d. 606/1209), the Sufi master of Shiraz, a prolific and powerful writer of works on Sufism in both Persian and Arabic. Rûzbehân’s characteristically poetic style employs the full range of metaphors of birds and flight to express the different modes of mystical experience. Rûzbehân’s concentration on the experiential dimension of Sufism makes his work especially valuable for revealing the mystical understanding of literary tropes. Although he frequently strains symbols to the breaking point, his constant clarification of their mystical significations makes him one of the most revealing authors in the Persian Sufi tradition.


4. Similar analyses could yield useful insights into Rûzbehân’s use of other prominent symbols and metaphors, such as desert, ocean, mirror, visage, image, bride, veil, light, stone, clothes, and sun.
Rūzbanī lived in Shiraz when it was a small island of prosperity and culture under the rule of the Salghurids, before the decline of the Seljuk and the advent of the Mongol conquests. He continued the line of Sufi tradition in Shiraz that went back to Ibn al-Khālid (d. 372/982) and through him to Baghdadian Sufis such as the martyrs al-Hallaj (d. 310/922). One may ask, however, from a purely literary point of view, how significant the works of Rūzbanī are for the understanding of later Sufism through the fifteenth century. Direct references to Rūzbanī in later Persian Sufi literature are not terribly common, and they tend to focus on his reputation as a lover of beauty. He is known for his prescription of the three things which the geostics require of a singer when listening to music (nāma): fine fragrances, a beautiful face, and a sweet voice (nawā'ī tā'īsūsī wa waṣḥī tāshī wa gāwā'ī muldī). Frequently one also finds mention of the well-known episode in which he forbade a young woman to veil her face, on the grounds that separating beauty and love would be a crime.

Rūzbanī’s writings were difficult, however, and there are not many explicit responses to his works by later authors. Some commentators on his writings do exist, however; an Anatolian Naqshbandi Sufi named Abdullāh Ilāhī Simūtī (d. 896/1491) commented on the Risālāt al-qādī (Treatise on the Sacred), a work on Sufism addressed to novices, and an anonymous writer also glossed Rūzbanī’s treatise on love, the Abhâr al-asâṣīn (Jasmine of the Lovers). We know that Rūzbanī’s works were studied by authors such as Jāmī (d. 1492) in fifteenth-century Herat, and that they attracted the interest of the Mughal prince.

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4. This commentary, entitled Manzûl al-qādī, is printed in Muhammad Taq Danish-pishuhi, ed., Rūzbanī-nāma, Shīrūn: yi Bastānī-yi Anjâman-i Abhâr-i Mīr, 60 (Teherān: Chip-khān-yi Rūhvi-
manān, 1347/1989), pp. 387-420, from a Ms. from Yugoslavia. 2 Other Ms. of this text are in
Egypē, and another is reported to be in Marâs, Turkey; cf. Abu Muhammad Rūzbanī al-Baghl al- Ī sânī, Nashr Mubârak al-sawâhī, ed. Naṣrī Ḥosān, Taṣawwūf al-Dawla, Fâṭimidyya, Yaqūn,
nez, No. 1876 (Iranshâh: Bahārī-yi Fakhrābâbâr Mathaṣ, 1974), Introduction, p. 1. On Bahār Simūtī,
who studied in Samarkand, see Jāmī in Herat, and died in Rumâlāh, see Rūzbanī-nāma, pp. 64-
66. See also Rūzbanī Bagh Shīrūn, Risālāt al-qādī wa ṣulūqī-yi muṣālī, ed. J. D. Nurbaksh
5. Rūzbanī Bagh Shīrūn, Abhâr al-asâṣīn, ed. Henry Corbin and Mohammad Mūsī, Ganjīn-
6. Šahīdī has identified Rūzbanī’s āfīf, ‘Asīr al-hayān, translated into Persian, and he wrote an
abridgement and update of Rūzbanī’s commentary on the ecstatic sayings of the early Sūfis
(Sawâhī-yi shāhshâhī) under the title Hājjat al-mahfīr (p. 256, m. 2). For the original text, see
Rūzbanī Bagh Shīrūn, Sawâhī-yi shāhshâhī, ed. Henry Corbin, Bibliothèque orientale 12 (Teherān:
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Shikhah (d. 1069/1659) in the seventeenth century. All these later figures testified to the difficulty of Rüzbahān's style, which at times is admittedly convoluted and obscure. Jamī remarked that "he has sayings that have perished forth from him in the state of overpoweredness, and obscurity, which not everyone can understand." Dara Shikh found his style "auguring." Despite the preservation of Rüzbahān's legacy by his son and grandson in Shiraz, and for all that Louis Massignon has traced the existence of the ṣa‘īda-i Rūzbahānīyya as far as Tumbakta, it must be admitted that none of his physical or spiritual descendents has been able to reach Rüzbahān's level of mystical attainment or to match him as a stylist in Persian or Arabic. It is true, however, the frequency of references to Rüzbahān that makes him relevant to the study of Persian Sufism; it is, rather, the penetration of his existential insight that makes his writing significant. It is only in recent decades that the rediscovery and publication of his writings has led to a renewed appreciation of his importance for the understanding of Sufism. Muhammad Mu'in, the pioneering editor of the 'Abhar al-ḥikāyat, remarked about this text, that "to understand the works of mystics such as Aṭṭār, Rāmī, ʿIraqī, Aḥwālī-i Kirmānī, and Hāfīz, researches on this book are quite necessary." I would enlarge upon this statement and say that the various writings of Rüzbahān Baqī form a vital resource for understanding the experiential basis of Persian Sufi literature.

Rüzbahān regards the symbol of the bird as "multivalent, capable of standing for a wide variety of spirits, persons, and experiences. The importance of this image in Rüzbahān's writings may be gauged by the frequency with which he uses it in the beginnings of his treatises, immediately following the praise of God and the Prophets. When commencing on a phrase used by Hallāj, "the fortunate bird," Rüzbahān offered a astounding number of possible interpretations:"

3. Louis Massignon, "La vie et les oeuvres de Ḡūrubān Baqī," in Opera Minora, ed. Y. Moedhar (Beirut: Dar al-Maʿārif 1963), II, 451-465, esp. 455-456 for the ṣa‘īda. As far as the subject of this paper is concerned, Rüzbahān's descendents have very little to say; there are no references to the symbolism of flight in their biographies of Rüzbahān, and the only mention of birds is in Kirmānī, in which Rüzbahān detected that a chicken offered as food was not lawful (Rūzbahān-nāma, pp. 45, 220-221).
4. Mo'in, Introduction to 'Abhar, p. 84. In this respect, Mīḥdūm shared the view of Dr. Qāsim Ghasi, that "from the point of view of the greatness of his mystical song, and from the perspective of ecstasy and spiritual state, Shaykh Rūzbahān is the ʿlā'i of Shaykh Abī ʿl-Maʿṣūm Kirmānī and Shaykh Abī ʿl-Maṣūm Abī Muʿīn Kirmānī," (Ghasi also admired Rūzbahān prominently in his list of twenty-eight major Sufi authors. See his Rūzbahān, p. xvi) vol. 2, Türkī (Istanbul: Taşköprü 1969, pp. 1, 54).
5. Extensive passages with bird imagery are found at the beginning of Rüzbahān's Karim commentary, 'Abhar al-muqaddas (p. 363, n. 2), in his letter to Ṣūrāl Din Kirmānī (p. 361, n. 6), and in the Ṣūrāl Din-Baḥrī (p. 362, n. 1), and phrases with bird imagery are frequent in the edicta of other poets as well (e.g., Shākīshī, shakīshīyān, p. 4, bottom).
6. Shākīshī, shakīshīyān, p. 355. This passage is a commentary on Hallāj's Proverbs 21, in which the "fortunate bird" is one of the symbolic transmitters of a wisdom.

Rūzbahān Baqī Preaching in Shiraz. From a manuscript of the Majālis al-awābaq, dated 959/1552. MS. Ouseley Add. 24, f. 54a (Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford)
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that Rūzbihān’s use of bird imagery is meant to recall spiritual experiences. This can be seen in a passage in which Rūzbihān speaks of the trapped bird as an image of the soul trapped in the body: “See what bird is in your trap, that the nest of the Simurgh of the throne cannot bear its grain!” The commentator remarks that “the universal intellect is incapable of comprehending [the soul’s] emanation, which is love.”

The particular birds most frequently invoked by Rūzbihān are the nightingale and the phoenix-like bird called Simurgh or Anāp. Unlike Rumi or Attar, Rūzbihān is not too interested in describing other varieties of birds and the qualities they represent. The nightingale, of course, is a staple of Persian poetry, as the figure of the impassioned human lover addressing the unattainable beauty of the divine rose. The Simurgh, at first a supernatural bird and helper of humanity in ancient Iranian mythology, has become a symbol of the divine in Persian literature. Because Rūzbihān so often stresses the ascension from human attributes to divine ones, he frequently blurs the distinction between the nightingale and the Simurgh. Thus he urges his reader to ascend to the true home, the heavenly nest.

Remove the belongings of the Simurgh from this narrow box, for the ocean of the divine is the nest of your eternal soul. Take the power of Jesus’ soul from the heavens of pre-eternity, so that with the birds of angelicity you complete a house for this nightingale of power.

Sometimes he combines the Simurgh with the Humā, the royal bird whose shadow designates a king. “Cast off the shadow of temporality’s veil from existence, so that the Humā of the Attributes opens the wings of pre-eternity, and the Simurgh of majesty comes from the ocean of eternity.” But always the injunction is the same: the soul ascends like a heavenly bird to find its identity, and like the birds in Attar’s tale, it finds God as its true self. When the Simurgh of the soul flies from the realm of humanity to the world of divinity, the growing soul speaks to itself in the rosebrower of Adam’s clay; those seeking the reflection of that shadowing ‘Anāp become the shadow of God.” At times the ‘Anāp as the transcendent God becomes overwrought: “Existence in relation to His might is less than an atom, and all the

1. Abkar al-‘alājī, p. 190, commenting on text, p. 62. In a similar fashion, this commentator identifies the “birds of silence” (text, p. 60) as “the people of concentration and meditation” (p. 187).

2. Occasionally Rūzbihān speaks of the phoenix (Sharḥ al-shaf’īyya, pp. 226, 236, Abkar al-‘alājī, p. 142, the hoptus (Sharḥ al-shaf’īyya, pp. 365, 370, or the crow (ibid., p. 157, Rashīd al-nāma, p. 223).


5. Stirm, Mosad al-tozkī, p. 40 (verse), commenting on the phrase ‘unveiling of the sanctity of sanctity’ in Rūzbihān al-‘alājī, ed. Nurbakht p. 44.


7. Stirm, Mosad al-tozkī, p. 40 (verse), commenting on the phrase ‘unveiling of the sanctity of sanctity’ in Rūzbihān al-‘alājī, ed. Nurbakht p. 44.


9. Ibid., p. 143. The ‘Insha’i Humā’ as image of the human soul appears in Abkar al-‘alājī, p. 62, while in a verse by Rūzbihān the Humā is the divinity which cannot to us the nest of the human being (Rashīd al-nāma, p. 355).

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gods of the heaven of power are lowly locus in the brek of the 'anghel of his eternal wrath.' Yet at other times, the soul overwhelmed by the ecstasy of shahf shifts from the imagery of the nightingale to the audacity of the hoopoe, who did not resist to show off his knowledge before Solomon.

The lily of beauty reached the stage of the nightingale of perfection. The shadow of the blessed tree of eternity became the illumination of the spring of the nightingales who claim "I am the Real." At the confluence of the sources of pre-eternity the hoopoe of the spirits drank the water of life of "Glory be to me." Thus is the feast of the solemnity of ascendency, they become the sovereigns of existence. With hidden tongue of the human intellect in the sanctified past beyond custody and throw, they said: "I learned something which you did not.

The plasticity of the nightingale and the Simaruk in Rūžbihan's imagery is a direct result of the sudden and perceptive outbursts of his spiritual experiences, which he has channeled in more direct terms in his autobiographical Kadhī as-Sakā.

Keeping in mind the freshness of these images in Rūžbihan's hands may help to counter the impression that frequently gets in later Persian poetry, that ages such as the nightingale and the rose have been deprived of all life and lovelyness at the hands of mundane poets. Rūžbihan's use of these symbols to indicate the ascenvalon experiences of the soul can help remind us of what a mystical interpretation of Persian poetry can be.

Rūžbihan makes use of an extended complex of imagery related to birds to express various mystical insights. When combined, these images provide a more comprehensive picture of the celestial habitat of the soul-bird. As we have already seen, the nest of the bird is a symbol of transcendence that reveals that the bird's true home is not earth but heaven. The nest must inevitably be located in a tree that is in the heavenly garden, such as the lotus or Tālib bird, as the bird discovered when it finally gains admission: "Since I saw that rose of the rose garden and the dark nectarines, the lotus and the Tālib trees are in your garden." But getting to that heavenly

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1. Ibid. p. 96.
2. Ibid. p. 200, quoting Koran, XXVII 22, the speech of the hoopoe to Solomon (also cited at ibid, p. 370).

and sing, recalling and fulfilling the primordial covenant it made by saying yes to God's question, 'Am I not your lord?' (Koran, VII. 171). "Let the rose of beauty grow before the nightingales of everlastingness on the branches of majesty, the nightingale of 'Am I not your lord' (sura) speak the secrets of love with those birds of the throne." According to Rūzbihān, the epiphany of God as the red rose is the supreme moment of this union.

There are times when Rūzbihān abandons the notion of the bird symbolic of the soul, taking it instead as a symbol of creation. He is led to do this especially when he encounters the anti-epiphanic verse of the Koran addressed to Abraham, "Take four birds and sacrifice them" (Koran, II. 260), for the Real does not fly. Rūzbihān in this way treats the birds as representing the unstable four elements of matter, which must be annihilated and abolished from consciousness, so that the ego can be destroyed and the Real can be revealed.

If you wish to know our allusion in reality, and to understand knowledge in one-ness, and to arrive at that which we described of the annihilation of the creature in the creator, carry four of the elements near to you, and with the sword of intoxication, love, and desire, cut them to pieces. Cut the throat of each bird in the court of the avians (birds), because the elements fly [away] and become unstable; the knowledge of that does not fly [away]. When you have killed and annihilated the birds of the heavens, and torn off from them the wings of spatial distances, and loosened power[1] from those weights of creation, then no duration, time, place, or existence claims you reach the world of utter nonexistence, and are annihilated in it, so that you do not know who you are.2

In a similar vein, İlāhi Simābī on occasion deals with birds as symbols of earthly life, the physicality of which must be transcended.

Every pigeon flies in a certain way, but this pigeon [flies] in a directionless direction. We are not kin to the birds of the air, and our grain is a grainless grain.

So at times the bird-symbolism is used to denote the limitations of physical existence. Most typically, however, Rūzbihān sees the bird as an image of the "rational spirit (rūḥ-ı nûdhâ)," the inner essence of humanity, which is forever seeking its divine counterpart even while trapped in the body. "The bird of intimacy, which is the rational spirit, flies in the lesser existence, which is the human body, in conversation with love in the cage of the heart." In a surprising aside of images, Rūzbihān

2. Shāhīr al-shahāīb, pp. 444-445, commenting on al-Hallāj's Tawâf al-4wâs 4,2, which contains the quotation of Koran, II. 260. Rūzbihān also offers the interpretation that the four birds are soul, heart, intellect, and ego, which must be annihilated to acknowledge the greatess of God, ibid., p. 485, 486. The symbolism of the birds as the four elements recurs in id., p. 352. Rûmi identifies the four birds allegorically as representations of different loving desires. (cf. Şenâne, Tawâf al-4wâs, p. 113.)
4. Abūkhâr al-ṣabīhīn, p. 70-71. For the use of this characteristic phrase rūḥ-ı nûdhâ, which derives from the vocabulary of al-Hallâj, see Rūzbihān al-qudūs, p. 29 (quoted above, p. 353); Shāhīr al-shahāīb, pp. 245, 336, 340-41, 361, 408, 413, 652.

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squeezes the symbol of the soul-bird to the limit, by showing how the soul's wings are consumed by the experiences of nearness and uncovering the bird has now been transformed into a moth, bursting up in the flame of love:

When the sacred birds of the sky fly from the nose-benefits of witnessing temporality, and traverse the atmosphere of the heaven of certainty, their tests are nowhere but in the gardens of nearness, the light of unveiling to the wings of their souls. From the waste of this fire, the wings of their souls are burned, and they remained wingless outside the door of the hidden, but the nose of the wing remained, in that station of theirs another wing appeared from pure love. With that wing, like moths, they flew again; round the candle of truth, on the basis of nearness, the light of their souls shone. Every wing, from spirit in spirit, had burned, they collected the knowledge of realities in the palace of pre-sternity. That knowledge became their wings of love and longing, and they flew in the atmosphere of utter nearness.

The successive destruction of each pair of wings at every level as the soul flies higher conveys the devastating power of this experience of transcendence.

Perhaps the most remarkable guise in which birds appear in Rūzbihān's writings is as personifications of Koranic verses and hadîth sayings. Many poets relied on the Koran's statement, "There is nothing that does not glorify him with praise" (XVII. 44), to show how all creatures praise God; the beautiful songs of birds were natural examples to use as a metaphor for creation's testimony to the creator (cf. Koran, XIX. 71; XXIV. 41). Rūzbihān, in a way, inverted the process of the metaphor. The symbol of the soul-bird had given an externalized form to a psychological-reality, the process and experience of transcendence. Now Rūzbihān re-imagines the image of the bird, reducing its image content to a minimum and making the symbol as transparent as possible to the underlying experience. Koranic verses, to Rūzbihān, are not mere words, but verbal theophanies, which act as catalysts for the transformation of the listening soul. The power of the Koran to bring about such a transformation is such that certain verses, for Rūzbihān, announce themselves like birds proclaiming the identity of the divine beloved. Thus we find that it is frequently "the bird of Am I not your lord?" (cf. Koran VII. 171) who reminds us of the primordial covenant by which humanity was sealed to God in pre-eternity. The bird of Koranic theophany does not only speak of the primordial covenant, but also recites the epiphanies to Moses on Mt. Sinai. "Have you not heard from Sinai's mese the 'Angel's cry of 'Truly I am God' (Koran, XXVIII. 10)?" The bird's Koranic proclamation of divinity does not concern some distant king, but is a reminder of immediate presence. "If from the suffering of love I heard the call of the birds of the morning of 'God spoke to Moses' (IV 164), I would be the partner and companion of the Sinai of 'There is no conspiracy of three but I am the fourth' (LVIII. 1)."

Finally, Rūzbihān puts the prophetic seal on this bird-externalization of

2. Shāhīr al-shahāīb, pp. 225, 230-231, 257 (where God gives the pearl of 'Am I not' to the cows of creation). 316. Rūzbihān al-qudūs, p. 3 quoted above, n. s. 43.
scripture, through birds that recall the ascension of the soul, modelled on the Proph.-et Muhammad’s ‘night journey (‘ira’i) to paradise and his confession of his inability to praise God. Do you not know that knowledge is the way of nearness, up to the gateway of eternity? Beyond that, one can fly no further with these. ... Whatever does not come out from the depths of nature, nor the glory to him who brought his (servant) to flight” (Koran, LVII 1) in the right of the soul’s ascension, does not know the cry of the nightingales: “I cannot count your praise” in the garden of the throne. 

In this way, Koranic verses become birds that fly like messengers from God and humanity, proclaiming divine lordship. Moreover, not only the Koranic revelation, but also the act of exegesis itself becomes another bird-flight, in response to Koranic divine word. A revealing passage located at the very beginning of his massive Koranic commentary, the Ar’as al-bayyiin or Bevis of Explanation, Rizâbîn describes and interprets one long flight in bird form to the paradise garden of the Koran.

When the birds of my mysteries (sarf) had finished flying in the states and stations, rising beyond the battlements of spiritual combat and self-observation, reaching the gardens of unveiling and witnessing, alighting on the branches of the flowers of nearness, and thinning the wine of union, they became intoxicated by seeing the divine beauty, love-stricken in the lights of divine splendor, and they recovered from their intoxication with the station of sanctity by the taste of intimacy. From the dawn of the Unmanifest they seized the blossoms of the subtleties of the Koran and the refinements of the truths of the Criterion. They soared on wings of gossips, and wasted the best alchemy by means of the melodies of paradise, [meaning] the mysteries (râwâid) of God (râ’la-t) by means of this tongue, mysterious that He has hidden from understanding of the people of forms.

The bird of the spirit ascends, then, in response to the call of the bird of revelation. Flight is a primary metaphor for spiritual experience. Rizâbîn states this boldly in his lexicon of Sarf terminology, where he defines the term “overwhelmings (phalabiyy) as “the flight of the spirit in nearness.” In his commentary on 101 spiritual stations, he describes flight (sarf) as station number 924, and he removes any suggestion of merely physical levitation from the term: “In the station of flight, it is the Khalafu who fly with the angels in spirit and body, for they are spiritual, in whom is the likeness of the angels... I have not flown in the air because of my knowledge, but I found that meaning by which they fly by me.” Thus, he knows the flight of the exalted figures called “successors (Khalâfas)” tied by external flight but perceiving them in the atmosphere of his soul. One begins practicing


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this kind of flight by meditation, which Rizabian describes in a chapter entitled “On the Meditation which is the Way for the Bird of Intimacy in the Station of Love.” In this section, all the metaphors of trapping birds in the desert are used to convey the approach to the beloved through the meditation of love. At its highest, the experience of love brings the lover to a state of utter nearness to the beloved, and then “he may fly like the spirituals of angelicity in the highest of the high with the peacocks of the angels, like Kháshîr, Iljûs, Idrîs and Jesus.” Spiritual experience as flight in this way encompasses the highest realms of the angels and prophets.

From the viewpoint of mystical experience, ascension to divinity is the key to the symbolism of birds and flight. Many of Rizabian’s allusions to flight explicitly invoke the most famous account of mystical ascension in Sufi literature, the ascen-
dsion of Bâyâzîd Bistâmî. Rizabian himself commented extensively on Bâyâzîd’s divine word. In a revealing passage located at the very beginning of his massive Koranic commentary, the Ar’as al-bayyi in Bevis of Explanation, Rizabian describes and interprets one long flight in bird form to the paradise garden of the Koran.

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1. Ibid., p. 106. "When the curtain of intellect pick up the barrier of the spirit's flight, the flight of the heavens of holiness becomes easy. The soul reaches the beloved's place of variation, the bird of love joins the cage of the bird of intimacy in the station of meditation, and the harem's trap catches the bird of meditation in the dawn of the heart." 2. Ibid., p. 142.

3. Shahr-i shoahbîy, pp. 80-82. See My Words of Euphony, Appendix, pp. 168-169, for a translation of this passage. The last sentence of the commentary on p. 169 is corrected to follow: "That was what he said concerning the eclipse of the Attributes; otherwise, he who is in the Essence — idle! For another mystic use of the term "eclipse (kabu’)," cf. Shahr-i shoahbîy, p. 92, line 2. 4. It is surprising to see R. C. Zarur's fanciful theory of the Unipassable origin of this symbolism has once again been revived even if not in a limited form, by Julian Badrach, in Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989). The imagery of wings, birds, and trees is abundantly present in the ascension sequence of the Near East from ancient times onwards, and it hardly seems necessary or meaningful to propose that Rizabian could only have learned of such an image from Islamic sources, which in any case here adopted different structures. 5. Shahr-i shoahbîy, p. 401. For other allusions to Bâyâzîd’s ascension, cf. ibid., pp. 22, 129, 167, 214; Rasul al-aqâb, p. 29 (quotation above), p. 316, "Akhâr al-oqâq."
‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti & the Bhagavadgita: “Unity of Religion” Theory in Practice

Roderic Vassie

INTRODUCTION

The legendary Shuykh San’īn of ‘Atjā’s Munāq al-nayr is exceptional in Sufi literature in turning apostate—albeit temporarily—in his quest for greater fulfillment. This being the case, what does it teach us about the realization, perceived in the writings of so many eminent Sufi masters, of a transcendental unity of religion? Given the extent of the debt owed by Sufi writers to the Koran and Sunna for inspiration when measured against their borrowings from other religious sources, has anything been said by affirming the unity of religions other than that a set of beliefs, rites, laws, etc. recognized as falling within the group ‘religions’ must, by definition, share some similarities with other members of the same group? To take the question a stage further, have Sufis ever actually taught that all Islam’s necessary goals can be achieved by following the religious teachings of one’s choice? Is it not rather the case that the interchangeability of religious symbols and ideas in Sufi verse and prose forms part of the art of mystical allegory, of which the Persian-speaking Sufis were consummate masters?

On the basis of ‘Abd al-Rahman Chishti’s Indo-Persian treatise, Mir’ēt al-haqiq, it is clear that in the Mughal empire Sufis conceived of only one tradition as capable of guiding the believer to the maqāṣid al-talwar (sublime goal),‘all other ways being to a greater or lesser extent deficient. That tradition was Islam, albeit in its broadest Koranic sense (“He named you ‘Muslims’ previously and in this book.”) Koran, XXII, 78).

‘ABD AL-RAHMAN CHISHTI

‘Abd al-Rahmin ibn ‘Abd al-Rasul ibn Qismn ibn Shih Buhd ‘Abbad. ‘Alawi Chisti belonged to the Sahib branch of the Chisti Order. He inherited the mantle of Shaykh from his brother, Hāmid, upon the latter’s death in 1623. Initially based in Radulli, he later moved west to a small village called Dhuwayt on the banks of the Gomti River nearer to Lucknow. In 1631, nearing the age of a hundred, he died and was buried in the building he had himself constructed.

Biographies of the Sahib branch show that he was not only blood relative but also a spiritual descendant of his great-grandfather, Buhd. However, in a rare autobiographical passage in his most important work, the hagiographical Mir’ēt al-


2. British Library MS. Or. 1883, f.255r.