

In the ancient tradition of Sufism, a mystical sect of Islam, it is believed that our souls have been trapped here on earth, within our bodies, caged and held back from reaching our true potential. The soul is equated with the essence of a bird, a free spirit able to fly in any direction she may choose, while the body serves as the cage, a stagnant and land-based shell, unable to see the space beyond its own existence. It is believed that if birds can escape their cages for just a moment, their connection and understanding with the outside world will greatly deepen (Aslan). The same is true for human souls, who may continue to entangle themselves in the mundane physical problems of their bodies on a daily basis, so long as they manage to center themselves and remember what is truly important: the divine love in and around our subconscious. Without a greater connection to this divine energy, or God, our souls lose their sense of purpose, and thus begin to focus solely on the physical hungers while ignoring the needs of their metaphysical self (Aslan). It is evident that each person around the world has their own either dictated or subconscious way of connecting with their path and purpose. Regardless of the context, the imperative question that we all are seeking to answer is, 'How do I escape the cage?' Whatever form this question may take, it is ultimately a search for happiness, for purpose, for God, and for greater understanding and spiritual peace. As I begin the life-long trial of escaping my own cage, and finding purity within all the chaos, I often look to the immense wisdom offered through various religious books and teachings, their stories helping to explain the unexplainable in the divine.

Sufism evolved as a type of mystical supplement to the strict orthopraxy of traditional Islam; it gave a name to the universal search for a pure connection between one's heart and God. Sufism cannot be defined as a religion because it does not have a set of defined rules or a leader but instead attempts to tackle the broader subject of paring down the unnecessary until all that is left is love for the divine. There is no general consensus as to when and where the tradition evolved, though most scholars believe that Sufi ideas about pure Godly connection have been around for thousands of years, only to be consolidated into their final form in the context of Islam around the time of Muhammad's appearance in the 600's (Ansary).

The first Sufis looked back to *Hadith*¹ where Muhammad himself separated the two types of jihad, a term for "effort" in Arabic that usually applies to a Muslim's "holy war" (Ansary)(Abate). Muhammad said that there is a greater jihad and a lesser jihad; the greater jihad being a struggle against internal enemies in order to reach God and expel one's ego, whereas the lesser jihad is the battle with external enemies who do not follow the correct path of Islam (Ansary). These early mystics took this idea of internal purity and took it to the extreme, often expelling all unnecessary material items and putting themselves in voluntary poverty. Their attempts to relate to Allah were not just based on the rigorous and specific acts associated with practicing Islam, but also a deeper connection with Allah himself. The earliest Sufi poets would describe radiant scenes of passionate and nearly erotic moments with God, depicting a truly carnal connection that ran deeper than anything our simple human minds could understand. Nevertheless, these early Sufis had still not created a new religion; they merely added a missing piece to the puzzle of Islam, a piece that is universally relevant.

As Sufism evolved, it began to separate into different sects, each one targeting a different group in society, and in a way, uniting the different types of Muslims all across Eurasia. Sufis had solidified a generally agreed upon goal, but the techniques for achieving this goal were incredibly varied, therefore, people naturally separated out into "brotherhoods." Each time a new

¹ Hadith refers to the first hand or second hand sources from the time that Muhammad was living. They include stories and accounts of the prophet's actions or thoughts.

story of enlightenment surfaced, the enlightened would begin to attract a cult following, as the public tried to copy this new, or old, technique of pureness and see if it would bring them a step closer to God (Ansary). In doing so, the followers of these gurus were essentially trying to cheat the system, similar to a fad diet or beauty technique, a sort of quick fix to find God without all of the spiritual devotion and effort that the enlightened had put in (Ansary). It is because of this individualized manner that Sufism began to spread and reinterpret itself, becoming a topic of great interest to people all across the globe, Muslim or not. The idea of finding God within oneself and feeling him in a deeper way than can be described with words is something many people search for, Muslim or not. Though Sufism itself relates directly to Islam, it is backed by a universal idea and its culture is filled with knowledge for people of all sorts.

Jalaludin-i Rumi was a central figure in exploring Sufi poetry and writing down some of his most personal encounters with Allah. *The Mathnawi Masnavi*, or The Spiritual Manuscript, is a guide he wrote for everyday humans to rekindle the original connection with God. The fables he tells are rich with metaphors and insight on the everyday distractions from God that are still relevant to this day (Rumi). The birds that he uses as characters have particular qualities that mimic the qualities of humans and the struggles that we face in searching for goodness. Just like many before him, Rumi employed this rich metaphor for human existence because both humans and birds have the ability to live wild and free, or lead their lives from within a cage, unaware of the big world around them. Like humans, birds are very social animals, often traveling in flocks and possessing the ability to communicate with each other, either through their own language or using the 'human language' as is observed in the speech of parrots. Conversely, free birds have the ability to effortlessly fly for hundreds of miles, a freedom which even with modern technology humans cannot quite achieve. This freedom acts as the perfect metaphor for the state of a free enlightened soul. Rumi's *Masnavi*, uses a complex web of allegories and poetry, drawn primarily from the Qur'an and Hadith, to explain the unique winding paths that we all must take from birth onward, only to reunite in the end with God. Historically, each bird that Rumi writes about has taken on a specific significance within Islamic culture and therefore, as a symbol, expresses a unique message when described in a fable or poem. The birds he writes about give advice to humans; demonstrating tactics that may help out on one's journey to God, they also point out the vices that hold us back from our true purposes.

There are eight main birds that act as representatives for the various forms of wisdom that bird symbolism has to offer. Parrots, the most common type of domestic or caged bird, originated in tropical regions and act as a messenger from the human subconscious, relaying messages from the divine and translating them into our own language. Parrots are often known for their ability to speak to us and yet their brains are not actually able to comprehend the words that they say. Parrots also represent a sort of domesticated exoticism because of their bright plumage and tropical origins. They evoke an image of both intrigue and familiarity, stating the unknown from within a home, a cage (Werness). Amongst the free birds, the Owl and the Falcon represent the two primary options once one is freed from the cage. The Owl lives in the dark, far from civilization, only relating with its own kind, whereas the Falcon rests upon the arm of the king, staying close to the power source and maintaining his relations and connection with any and all who venture to the court. The Falcon holds a pure, open vision, flying during the day and returning to his master's arm at night, while the Owl lives in seclusion, coming out in the dark, lost without the guidance of a master. The Falcon represents a follower who has fallen off track, one who has insight but has pointed it in a skewed direction. Rumi's stories often include the

Falcon as an exemplary option working in contrast with the Owl who has lost his way after enlightenment (Rumi).

In addition to these bird characters, Rumi talks about the four vices, who work together to exemplify the excesses of human existence: the Peacock displaying physical beauty, the Duck representing gluttony, the Cock showing lust, and the Crow being an omen for bad luck and a sign of malicious intent. These birds are like untouchable spirits, merely symbols continually trying to rid themselves of their exorbitance and separation from God. When they are exhibited in one of his fables, Rumi tells stories that involve the shedding of their unnecessary and bad attributes, ending on a note of rebirth and greater understanding (Rumi).

The last and most powerful bird is the Phoenix, a bird so exquisite it nearly plays the role of God himself. The Phoenix is rare, and when sighted acts as an omen, serving the purpose of reminding humans to stay in awe of God's power. The Phoenix reminds one to soak up moments with the divine because they may be fleeting and far between. The Phoenix is quite likely an unreal creature and therefore its existence can only rely on faith. The Phoenix reminds us to have faith even when we cannot see it, to hold God close and be open to any help He may have to offer us because He is always there (Werness).

When I look more closely at my understanding of my own spirituality, I see that I have a deep love for the religious connections that Rumi describes. Religion to me is something that we should all stay close to, but never become too heavily involved in. I very much enjoy going to mass and reading religious myths, and I am absolutely fascinated by the overlap between major monotheistic religions and their less celebrated pagan counterparts. I feel the power of worship when I enter a church and visit a holy spot, but I also feel it when I sing, when I am lost in nature, and when I feel proud. It is as if each one of us has a lens of understanding about the world; alone the lens explains nothing, but when every single one is layered on top of each other, an image of God and the divine begins to take form. I believe that Socrates was correct in saying that only thing we know for sure is that we know nothing at all; just because we cannot understand something does not mean it does not exist, and just because we can imagine something does not mean it is true. To me, God is a word, a concept, not an old man with a beard. I was not raised a Muslim and I am not by any means part of Sufi culture, but I deeply respect the idea that through intense personal journey and introspection, we can all find our own religion of sorts, something that holds on to our heart and feeds us enough faith to get through the day. Whether this attachment is to Jesus, science, art, farming or Lady Gaga, we all need a sense of purpose and a force to carry us along our paths. The more determination and power we can gather, the more we can accomplish.

To me, God is the divine, the power source and fuel for the fires of passion we must kindle within ourselves in order to reach the final goal at the end of our paths. It is as if each and every one of us is dropped deep into the forest with a navigation system programmed to take us to heaven. Because everyone has a different starting place in the woods, we will all go different ways, and because each step of the foot has not been prescribed, the paths may wobble; in the end, we are all headed the same way. I cannot judge the paths that others decide upon, only the brightness of the flame burning within them. Passion is passion no matter which direction it is pointed and the feelings of love and passion are the closest experiences we have to coming into contact with divine energy.

The more I read about religious figures and icons, the more upset I become that these stories are taken so literally. When the Qur'an tells women to be veiled from harm, I do not believe it means that all women must wear a veil, and when the Bible discusses Adam and Eve, it

was not meant to outlaw the homosexuality of distant generations. The stories of religious literature give us guidance but not answers because there are no answers. It upsets me deeply to know that some of the most beautiful pieces of writing in the world have been the cause of countless wars and conflicts throughout history. All that I hope to do is to extend the reach of my passions as far as humanly possible, learn as much as I can, and soak up the wise words of religious masters. The enlightened are the ones who have taught us the correct path throughout history, but who is to say that their fire will burn as brightly in me? I believe that we all must search for the things that we love and believe in and follow them until death do us part.

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