

“MÜSLÜMANLAR YUNUS EMRE’Yİ OKUYABİLİR Mİ?”: YUNUS’UN ŞİİRLERİNİ SINIFLANDIRMA SORUNU

-“Can Muslims Recite Yunus Emre?”:The Problem Of Classifying Yunus’ Poetry -

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Abstract: *The fatwa by Ebussuud, the religious authority of the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire, stating Muslims must not recite Yunus Emre’s poetry is the starting point of this study. By pointing out Yunus’ terminology and ideas which are against Orthodox Islam, the essay argues that his poems could not have been used for religious education of the new Muslim converts as presented by Grace Martin Smith and Annemarie Schimmel. In Yunus’ poetry, the mystic items are widely employed to illustrate the divine love. Hence, the paper argues the idea that even if Yunus’ poetry is used for educative purposes, this must be for mystic rather than Islamic instruction. To conclude, the paper refers to Ibn Arabi’s statement: “Those who are not one of us and do not know our station should not read our books, for it may be damaging for them.” Thus, the paper questions the functionality of Yunus Emre’s poems by putting forward the idea that Yunus’ so-called audience – uneducated commoners in terms of religion– is not suitable for mystic teachings, especially the philosophy of unity of existence.*

Key Words: *Yunus Emre, mysticism, Islam, Muslim, mystic, function, classification, problem.*

This question has long been answered by Ebussuud, the religious authority of the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire, by stating that Muslims must not recite Yunus Emre’s poetry.¹ The reason for this fatwa is Yunus’ attitude towards the

¹ This information is confirmed by my professors: Hilmi Yavuz, a well-known authority in the field of Islamic philosophy; Kudret Emiroğlu, a distinguished researcher of Ottoman texts and Nuran Tezcan, who teaches Ottoman literature courses. Although I could not find the exact fatwa in *Şeyhülislâm Ebussuûd Efendi Fetvaları* (Sheikh ul-Islam Ebussuud Efendi’s Fetwas) by Mehmet Ertuğrul Düzdağ, which is an edited collection of the fatwas, Ebussuud’s condemning remarks about Mansur Al-Hallaj (192), from whom Yunus was highly effected, can be regarded an evidence for his disapproval of Yunus.

Beloved's face and his perception of Divine Love. On the other hand, this statement has a political background as well as a religious reasoning. However, this essay will approach the question by discussing the Islamic propriety in Yunus's poetry referring to religious texts disregarding the political controversies of that period.

Nowadays, Yunus is considered to be one of the greatest mystic poets to discourse on love of God as is stated by Talât S. Halman, in *Yunus Emre and His Mystical Poetry*, "[a] vast majority of renowned mystic poets among his contemporaries and successors have failed to stand the test of time, but Yunus Emre's work is still a joy to read and retains its ethical and aesthetic relevance" (vi). The modern approach towards Yunus' poetry regards it as mystical and humanistic and acclaims its aesthetic values. Nonetheless, the questions of how "Islamic" Yunus' poetry is and whether Yunus' poetry can be used for the purpose of teaching religion to new Muslims as suggested by Grace Martin Smith and Annemarie Schimmel, remain unresolved. This essay will point out the ways in which Yunus' poetry contradicts with orthodox Islam and discuss these aspects with paying little or no attention to the aesthetic or literary qualities of these poems. Thus, the main purpose for writing this paper is to provide an uncommon perspective and claim that Yunus' poems are not thoroughly Islamic but rather they are mystic and they cannot be used as religious instructions for the new Muslim converts not only because of their non-Islamic context but also because of the fact that their teachings are beyond the intellectual capacity of Yunus' so called audience, common folk.

Unveiling the Beloved

"Love is the vision of Him in hearts" (qtd. in Mason 82)

To begin with, in Islamic tradition trying to perceive God's existence with limited human intellect is regarded a sinful act. Annemarie Schimmel explains, "One has to accept the way in which He describes Himself in the Koran, for according to Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, 'the Qur'an expresses God's inconceptualizability in the most emphatic manner.'" (220). As God teaches Adam the names after the Creation², He teaches His ninety nine beautiful names through Quran³ and *Hadith* to humanity because He is inconceivable for their intellect. The number of God's names hints that the list is incomplete. So there are suggestions

² Al-Baqarah (2:31).

³ Al-Araaf (7:180).

that God has a hundred names and the last one is hidden for the sake of setting a limit to human intelligence. Schimmel's statement, "Even though the Muslims knew the Ninety-nine most beautiful Names of God, (...) they also knew that the greatest Name of God must never be revealed to the uninitiated (...) for the name has a strong power" refers to God's incomprehensibility because all the other names fail to reveal His Essence and it is only through the Hundredth unperceivable name that one can have an understanding of the true Essence (119). Thus, the Essence is what the mystics search for. Since the Prophet (pbuh) has *looked at* God at the end of Mi'raj, The Night Journey, the mystics believe that if they devote themselves to God in the most sincere manner, they will be able to *see* Him.

The mystic poetry mainly deals with the subject of the longing of a Sufi for God. The mystics express both their suffering and the indifference of their Beloved. For example, Yunus' poem "Sen xod bize bizden yakın görünmezsın hicab nedür" questions the reason why God does not reveal Himself and the secrets of the universe to the poetic persona:

You are closer to us than we are [to ourselves], [but] You are not visible. What is this barrier? Since there is no defect in Your beautiful face, what is this veil?

You said, "He shows the way to what He wants." You have no partner, O king. Who is guilty; what is [this] reproach?

Who is the writer on the Tablet? Who is He leads astray, and he who strays? Who is the person who regulates these matters? What is the answer to this question?

Your name is Merciful; You told me of Your mercy. What is this discourse which Your spiritual guides give good news of: "Don't cut off hope [of God's mercy]"?

You know these matters; it is You who give them, You who take them away. Since You know whatever I have done, what is this Trumpet and Accounting?

Where is the sultan of this realm? If this is the body, where is the soul? This eye wants to see that. What is the refuge of this one who has been taken into God's mercy?

Yunus, this eye won't see that, and those who see won't tell about it. Intellect will not reach this stage. What is the mirage You have left? (Smith 54)

Judging from Yunus' words, his acceptance for inadequacy in human intellect to perceive God is clear especially in the last couplet. In this poem, Yunus reflects that rational investigation does not suffice to attain complete knowledge of God and the Universe. His reference to Quranic verses⁴ and certain terminology related to Islamic tradition⁵ add more to the Islamic aspects of this very poem. However, not all his works are like this one. In several of his poems, Yunus claims seeing God's image or/and face or he longs for seeing Him:

I have these eyes of mine *to see your face,*

I only have hands to seek your embrace.

Today I shall set my soul on the road

So that tomorrow *I can reach your place.* (Halman, *The Humanist* 80)

Upon seeing the Beloved's face, polytheism was taken away. That's why the Holy Law was left at the door. (Smith 33)

O lovers, o lovers, love is sect and religion for me. *My eyes have seen the face of the Beloved;* all mourning is for me celebration. (Smith 10)

Yet, according to the Quran: "No human vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all human vision: for He alone is unfathomable, all-aware" (6:103). God states that nobody is able to see him. That is why in Islamic terminology, neither in Quran nor in Sunnah, there is no statement about "seeing God". Even the Prophet (pbuh), God's Beloved, at the end of The Night Journey "looked at God" for He is inaccessible to human perception, imagination or comprehension. In the Quran, God states: "Some faces will on that Day be bright with happiness, *looking up to their Sustainer*" (75: 22-3). In Arabic, as in English, the verbs "رظن" (to look) and "رصب" (to see) differ and in the quoted verse "رظن" is used with an emphasis⁶. Thus, Yunus' attitude towards God's face or/and image is not suitable for Islam.

⁴ "For We are closer to him than his neck-vein" (50:16),
 "He guides whom He wills onto the straight way" (2:142, 213, 272),
 "The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace" (2:3) (Each Basmala has these Names),
 "Do not lose hope of God's life-giving Mercy" (12: 87).

(These verses are taken from Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an*)

⁵ Tablet, Trumpet and Accounting.

⁶ وَجُوهُ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَاصِرَةٌ (75:22) وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ (75:23) – It is repeated in both of the verses.

When the Prophet (pbuh) talks to God in person at the end of The Night Journey, he reaches the utmost limit “Sidr al-Muntaha”, the Lote-tree. Asad explains this situation in his notes for verse 14 of surah 53:

One may assume that the qualifying term *al-muntaha*⁷ is indicative of the fact that God has set a limit to all knowledge accessible to created beings, (...) implying, in particular, that human knowledge, though potentially vast and penetrating, can never –not even in paradise (the “garden of promise” mentioned in the next verse)-attain to an understanding of the ultimate reality, which the Creator has reserved for Himself. (813)

Hence, to reach beyond this limit is, as stated in Quran, impossible for created beings. Even the Most Beloved Prophet (pbuh) is not allowed to tread beyond that limit. However, the mystics want to surpass such limitations and reach their Beloved. To concretize this effort, the moth-candle imagery is widely used in Mystic circles. The moth, always wandering around the candle, is attracted to its light. Whenever it comes closer to the candle, it gets burnt and is obliterated. Likewise, the mystics claim that a human being cannot do without God and wanders around God’s Light wishing to annihilate in the Divine Fire. “Desire is the fire from the Light of the primordial Fire... the fire of Desire inflames them [the mystic lovers] with Reality whether they are near to it or far.” (qtd. in Mason 57). Whether wishing to be annihilated in God’s Light is appropriate according to Islam or not is questionable; yet making claims against Quranic verses is unacceptable in Islam. If God sets a limit, claiming to reach or desiring to reach beyond this limit is contravening God’s order.

God promises an endless life to his followers in Paradise. However, despite all the beauties of Paradise, the mystics abhor life in Paradise and desire to get more – by reaching His Essence. When the Prophet (pbuh) depicts the beauties created for the settlers of Paradise, he states: "By Allah, they have not been given anything dearer to them and more delightful than looking at Him."⁸ On the other hand, the mystics believe that seeing God is much more precious than the promised beauties in Heaven because God is Al Jameel, the Most Beautiful. Yunus in the continuation

⁷ Meaning ending, in this context it can be translated as “the last”.

⁸ Sahih Muslim, Book 1, Number 0347

of above quoted poem (I have these eyes of mine to see your face) reflects the mystics' approach to Paradise:

Do not offer your Paradise to me,
 I have no wish to fly to Paradise.
 Who needs it, what use is Heaven to me?
 My heart's eye would not even glance at it.
 All this sorrowful clamoring of mine
 Is not for a garden up in the skies.

You keep trying to use it to entice
 The Faithful, but what you call Paradise
 Cannot boast of more than a few hours
 And I don't hanker after their caress.

Offer it to those who go by the creed;
 You're the one I crave, you're the one I need.
 My leaving you would be a shameful deed
 For the sake of a mansion and trellis. (Halman *The Humanist* 80)

The mystics do not regard the Paradise the ultimate reward for the believers. They believe more is achievable if they strive for more. Besides, although the Quran and Hadith describe the paradise as a desirable place, the visualized landscape in this poem is nothing but the pastoral scenery of an ordinary village. The poetic persona does not pay any attention to the beautiful hours and promises that he will not in the future either. He is enthusiastic about seeing his Beloved and uniting with Him. However, as stated earlier, for orthodox Islamic reasoning, what the poetic persona does is surpassing the bounds set by God himself and such people are the ones who go astray.

Uniting with God

“Ours were the act of lovers mad with love” (qtd. in Mason 91)

According to Grace Martin Smith, “Two figures with whom Yunus identifies are Majnun, the lover of Leyla, who is considered the Lover par excellence, and Hallaj, the ‘martyr to love,’ executed in Baghdad in 922.” (10). In the paper so far, Yunus’ Majnun aspect is presented. In Majnun’s story, Qays goes crazy because of his extreme love for Layla and is denominated as “Majnun” meaning “Madman” in Arabic. Later on, he finds out that love should be directed to God for He is the real Beloved and deserves to be loved most. Majnun’s conclusion is what Islam requires for the servants of God. God wants to be loved most by his servants. Yet, according to orthodoxy, this love must be prudent, that is to say it should not be like Hallaj’s, who claimed to have reached union with the Divine Beloved. Hallaj was executed for his famous statement: “Ana al-Haqq” (I am God, the Absolute Truth) and Yunus acts similarly in his poem that reads (evvel benem ahir benem):

I am before, I am after---

The soul for all souls all the way.

I am the one with a helping hand

Ready for those gone wild, astray.

(...)

It’s not Yunus who says all this:

It speaks its own realities;

To doubt this would be blasphemous:

“I’m before –I’m after,” I say. (Halman, *Yunus Emre* 142)

Actually what Yunus does in these lines is not different from what Hallaj did centuries before him to bring his own end. Hallaj declared that he is the Truth and Yunus claims that he is Before “al-Awwal” and After “al-Akhir, two other names of God. Al-Ghazali explains these names, which are included among the ninety nine beautiful names⁹: “He is last with respect to wayfaring, and first with respect to

⁹ God’s names are Al-Awwal and Al-Akhir and they are employed in Yunus’ original poem in Turkish as “Evvel benem, ahir benem”. However, in David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher’s translation of al-Ghazali’s work *awwal* and *akhir* are translated as first and last

existence: the first beginning was from Him; and to Him is the last return and destination.” (134). Also in Quran, there is a statement about God which reads: “He is the First and the Last” (57:3). Thus Yunus claims to be united with God by applying God’s characteristics to his very self, as Hallaj did, regarding himself the same with God.

In his poem that begins “benüm canum uyanıkdur, dost yüzine bakan benem” (my soul is awake; it is I who am looking at the face of Beloved) the poetic persona’s omnipotence, omniscient and omnipresence –that is to say God-like features- are apparent:

All these matters are of my arranging; with my mystical knowledge [I order]
summer and winter.

(...)

It is I who speak in all languages, all tongues.

(...)

Now my name is Yunus; at that time it was Isma’il.

(...)

The wheel of destiny is under my command, wherever I sit. (Smith 91-2)

In the quoted lines, the poetic persona clearly compares himself with God. He declares to have control over the created beings. He has an immeasurable knowledge about the secrets of the universe and he has the command of all languages. In addition to that, he presents himself as if he is not confined to chronospatial restrictions since he can be anywhere anytime. Beside all these implications of the unity of existence, he makes a direct reference to Hallaj in this very poem: “With that Hallaj I used to say, ‘I am the Truth.’ Again it is I who placed the gallows rope on his neck.” (Smith 91). In these lines he not only claims to be with Hallaj or to be Hallaj himself, but also he declares that he was who executed Hallaj. So he presents himself as if he is not confined to a sole body. His being is like God’s, not restricted by chronospatial boundaries and is an absolute non-delimited reality. However, for

and in Talat Halman’s translations of Yunus, the names are translated as before and after. The confusion is because of the different choices of the translators.

the orthodoxy man's position among the created is designated and he should act accordingly.

Man on the Scale of Beings

Before God creates Adam, He acknowledges the angels about His thought to create men. He dictates: "I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it (establish on earth a successor or a vice-gerent)" (2:30). Then the angels ask if God will create a successor who will spread corruption and bloodshed on earth. At the end of this conversation, God shows the angels that human beings are superior to the angels since the angels are made to prostrate themselves before Adam. What is more, God clearly illustrates human beings' superiority to all other animate beings: "We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land, sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above most of Our creation." (17:70). Thus, man's place is above the rest of the created beings and below God. Although there is a connection between God and man, man should always be the one who pleads –as a servant– for His mercy. Orthodoxy requires the servants to follow God's rule along with the Sunnah, what the Prophet (pbuh) ordered and/or did. Islam has set the rules for religious practices, do's and don'ts and requires the followers to conform to these limitations. "Now whenever God and His Apostle have decided a matter, it is not for a believing man or woman to claim freedom of choice insofar as they themselves are concerned: for who [thus] rebels against God and His Apostle has already, most obviously, gone astray." (33:36).

The first rule for somebody to become a Muslim is to state the Shahada: "Ařhadu an lā ilāha illa-llāha, wa ařhadu anna Muammad(an) Abduhu wa rasūluhu" (I bear witness that there is no god but God, and I bear witness that *Mohammad is God's servant* and His Messenger). The shahada is also used in the practice of prayers and each time it is uttered, the significance of being a "servant" to God is emphasized because in this statement the Prophet's (pbuh) being a servant of God precedes his being the messenger of God. However, according to the mystics being a "lover" and "friend" of God and even saying "anâ l-Haqq is much humbler than to say 'Abd Allâh [servant of God], for in the former there is no retaining of self to assert distinction, whereas in the latter one affirms oneself as separate indeed

pretentiously as a servant” (Mason 85). The mystics place man in a higher position than orthodoxy. The orthodoxy always treats God as the Unattainable Being who is much closer than the neck-vein. However, for the mystics, “everything we perceive in the cosmos is nonexistent in itself, but existent in some sense through the Real’s wujud” and because of the latent godlike features of man, man can attain God’s features (Chittick 167). This is another point of conflict between the ulema and the mystics. To get back to the point, what Yunus embroiders in his poetry is his desire to reach God or God-like features. So, what he teaches is mysticism rather than Islam and its practices.

Back to Love

Will those who love You have a reason? [Even] if for a moment they are rational, they are always mad. (qtd. in Smith 61)

Hallaj was a follower of Ibn Arabi’s teachings, specifically the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud (the unity of existence). As for Yunus, in certain poems this concept is observable and it is known to be a controversial subject in Islamic circle. Halman states, “In Yunus Emre’s vision there is no place for the abysmal fallacy which segregates God and man” (*The Humanist* 15). The followers of Wahdat al-Wujud principles believe that God exists in his creation and vice versa. That is to say all created beings reflect God and have a godly aspect in themselves. That is why God is able to be anywhere and that is how he controls his creation –through being in them. Hence the human beings, according to this philosophy, can realize their God(-like) features by giving up their human aspects. The followers of this philosophy attempt to go through several phases believing to reach the Essence at the end of their journey. Thus they claim uniting with God. Actually that is an unacceptable approach for the Orthodox Islamic tradition. Many *Ulema*, Muslim scholars and certain Mystics criticize the concept that all things exist through God, which is the main principle of Ibn Arabi’s philosophy. *Ulema* regard such ideas as surpassing the acknowledged limits for human being and for them such thoughts lead to going astray.

The subject whether the philosophy of Wahdat al-Wujud is appropriate for Islamic principles or not may lead to a book-length discussion without reaching a clear conclusion. The aim of this paper is not to discuss this philosophy’s grounds but to point out to the fact that Yunus Emre did employ figures of speech to indicate

the unity of existence in his poetry knowing that the subject was controversial and not suitable for the common people. This is where the question of the propriety of his poetry is raised. As for Grace Martin Smith, “Yunus’ mission –self-imposed or set by his sheikh– was to travel among [common] people, inform and educate them concerning the basic tenets, and strengthen their faiths” (6). However, as his poems are presented so far, it is apparent that not all his poems include Muslim teachings and religious tenets. He discusses mystic thoughts in his poetry which are far from the intellectual capacity of common people, Yunus’ so-called subjects. Parallel to this thought, Ibn Arabi announces that “Those who are not one of us and do not know our station should not read our books, for it may be damaging for them” because he believes that if somebody’s spiritual qualification is not sufficient enough to understand such philosophical approaches towards Islam, their faith might be put in danger (qtd. in Horkuc 81). Likewise, it would not be inappropriate to state that an ordinary Muslim should not read Yunus Emre’s poems which include figures of speech related to Wahdat al-Wujud to learn Islam since even the founder of this philosophy agrees with its impropriety for “the beginners”.

On the other hand, Yunus’ poetry can be regarded as a source to teach love of God. Yunus, being aware of his faculty claims:

At religious schools, no master

Managed to study this chapter;

Those professor failed to explain

The essence of that advanced phase. (Halman, *Yunus Emre* 171)

Although the masters at religious schools cannot handle the chapter about love of God, Yunus is able to illustrate this complex state of mind.

Yunus Emre, himself, is most probably a learned man. Although the information about his biography is “often inadequate or contradictory, and even mixed somewhat with legends” because of his Diwan and Risalat al-Nushiyya the literary critics claim that Yunus Emre is at least an educated person if not a literate (Köprülü 268). So he is not like the common people who have little knowledge about the religious practices and almost no knowledge about the philosophic aspect of religion. That is why Yunus’ poems which discourage people from practicing religious rituals and promise them more than what is promised in the Holy Quran is not suitable for ordinary people’s religious education.

To fast and perform prayers,
 I drank wine and got ecstatic.
 For genuflection and God's praise,
 I listened to rousing music. (qtd. in Başgöz 32)

The fasting, the alms, the ritual prayers and pilgrimage are all wrongdoings and crimes. (qtd. in Başgöz 25)

To teach an ordinary person that performing the religious acts which are considered among the five pillars of Islam is wrong and crime is not suitable for somebody who is supposed to teach Islam. For Sufis, who have their own way of religious practices and praying, such an instruction may be acceptable. However for unlearned and uneducated folk, as suggested by Ibn Arabi, such an act may be damaging to their faith. Thus, the mystics' regarding themselves not confined to religious practices is not suitable to be taught to new Muslim converters. Thus, Yunus' teachings can be classified as mystic but not Islamic.

Conversely, Yunus has an answer for such an argument, he says:

Other than the Beloved, no one knows who is a Muslim and who a misbeliever. I would pray if God accepted my unorthodox behavior. (Smith 112)

Here he claims that nobody can tell whether somebody is a Muslim or not. Yet, what this paper is attempting to do is not to question Yunus' religious stance but rather to discuss his poetry's appropriateness for ordinary Muslim's religious teachings.

Conclusion

Mysticism and Islam have very different terminologies and perception of religion, love and God. That is why using the two words as synonyms is improper. Namely, what Yunus Emre writes is mystic poetry but not Islamic teachings. Accordingly, Yunus' poetry as a whole cannot be identified as "preaching poem" explained in the following statement: "[It] form[s] a large part of the education of an essentially non-literate population. It prompt[s] proper behavior, convey[s] the basic Muslim message to potential converts, and strengthen[s] the faith of all Muslims" (Smith 7). Yunus' poetry is not totally about teaching Islamic doctrines. What is

more, it may have a damaging effect on ordinary people's faith, especially when it deals with the philosophy of the unity of existence. Hence it is not entirely Islamic but is mystic because Yunus' poetic persona is mostly a mystic who dwells on love of God with his uncomplicated and comprehensible –and thus attractive– language. So, Yunus' poetry is an exceptional source to learn about a field of study which is beyond the capacity of “masters at religious schools” but it is not suitable to be used for the sake of religious teachings of the new converts.

A Last Word

Although it is not related to the question of whether Yunus' poetry is mystic or not, I want to clarify a point about the use of “humanist” to define Yunus' poems. Yunus Emre's love for the created beings is not because of his humanism. Yunus loves the creatures because of his belief in the unity of existence, as he states: “We love the created for the Creator's sake” (qtd. in Halman, *Yunus Emre* 3). His call for unity and the entire brotherhood theme in his poetry are results of Sufism which calls for harmony among all people:

Every person brought a word. One said a “Person of the Sacred Trinity”, and an “Idol”, another gave the name of “Incarnation” and the third said “The representation of the Deity in the form of man” (Anthropomorphism). All these words do bring the desired object near in one way and remove it in another way; but the corruption caused by them is much greater than the reformation worked by them. (Walī-Allāh 123)

This quote reflects the philosophy of the mystics about the unity of human beings. That is why regarding Yunus' approach as humanist is similar to thinking that somebody who has been to Mecca for his pilgrimage several times must have wanderlust. Yunus' philanthropy is not because of his humanistic approach to the individuals but rather because of his being a strict follower of the mystic teachings.

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