



The Experience of Unity as Portrayed by Rumi and Teresa of Ávila

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Abstract

Unity is the perception of oneness and the vision of the world as a singular existence. In philosophical traditions, it is achieved through rational contemplation, while in mystical traditions, it is attained through experiential insight. Rumi (d. 1273 CE) and Teresa of Ávila (d. 1582 CE), mystics from Islam and Christianity, respectively, have expressed views on unity in their works. Extracting and comparing these views can be beneficial for a more precise understanding of unity and the process of experiencing it. This article aims to explain the relatively similar perspectives of these two mystics on unity, which can serve as a useful step in clarifying both existential and experiential unity. The study uses descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods to examine their views. The article suggests that the dominant perspective in the works of both Rumi and Teresa is more inclined towards experiential unity, and both mystics consider the experience of unity beyond verbal expression. However, Rumi conveys his experience of unity through the words of others, while Teresa describes it in her own voice. For understanding and experiencing this unity, self-negation and prayer accompanied by meditation play significant roles, although Teresa places more emphasis on these factors than Rumi. Teresa is also more detailed and precise than Rumi in expressing her experiences of unity. While Rumi emphasizes external states, Teresa focuses on internal states in realizing this experience.

Keywords: Unity, Experience, Mystical Insight, Rumi, Teresa of Ávila.

Introduction

Eastern and Western mystics all hold some belief in unity, to the extent that mysticism without a belief in unity lacks foundation and meaning. This belief has a long history among Muslim mystics, with some holding a belief in unity. However, in mysticism, two streams—unity of being and unity of witnessing—have been present from the beginning to the present. This situation has also been evident among Christian mystics, where it has led to debates, persecution, and sometimes even executions. Meister Eckhart (d. 1327 CE) is one such mystic who was condemned to death for his belief in the unity of being, and Marguerite Porete (d. 1310 CE) was burned at the stake along with her book for the same reason. Eckhart was not the only mystic who believed in the unity of being; others like John Tauler (d. 1361 CE), Henry Suso (d. 1366 CE), and Jan van Ruysbroeck (d. 1381 CE) also propagated similar ideas. Rumi (d. 1273 CE) and Teresa of Ávila (d. 1582 CE) also spoke of unity in their works. Rumi refers to the "shop of unity" in his Mathnawi, while Teresa discusses unity in her "Seventh Dwelling" and "Fourth Mansion" of *The Interior Castle*.



The question of this article is: What is the nature of the unity described in Teresa of Ávila's works? This paper hypothesises that both mystics are "mystics of unity of witnessing," rather than unity of being. This article seeks to clarify their views using descriptive, analytical, and comparative methods, and most importantly, to compare their perspectives.

Research Findings

One of the findings of this article is that these two mystics, despite belonging to different religious traditions—Christianity and Islam—share notable similarities, such as the experience of unity of witnessing. Although scholars have debated whether Rumi's unity is of being or of witnessing, this article emphasizes the unity of witnessing for Rumi. This is because, in his view of unity, he does not negate or dismiss the existence of other beings. To distinguish between the two types of unity, the attitude towards other beings can be a criterion: if the mystic views other beings as devoid of real existence, it is unity of being; if they acknowledge a share of real existence in them, it is unity of witnessing. Both mystics believe that prayer accompanied by meditation, humility, self-negation, and modesty contribute to understanding unity. It must be noted that unity in the view of mystics is not a mental or cognitive matter, but rather an existential and experiential one. Increased patience, tolerance, and mystical humility are among the outcomes of understanding unity.

Conclusion

This article shows that despite some scholars considering Teresa and Rumi as proponents of unity of being, the dominant tendency is towards unity of witnessing, with the evidence in their works supporting this conclusion. This is because neither of these mystics, in their unified view of existence, denies the true existence of anything besides God. However, evidence supporting the unity of being can also be found in the works of both mystics, particularly in Rumi's works. Both emphasize that they cannot fully articulate their experience of unity. The way they express their mystical experience differs: Rumi uses indirect methods, while Teresa employs direct expression. Rumi considers many factors in the realization of unity, while Teresa emphasizes self-negation, humility, and prayer accompanied by meditation, with nearly all her experiences of unity occurring during prayer. Teresa is much more detailed in her descriptions of her experiences, even specifying the duration of her mystical experiences, such as half an hour or an hour, while Rumi speaks more generally about the times of these experiences. Rumi expresses his experiences of unity mostly in terms of external states, whereas Teresa describes them primarily in terms of internal states. Increased patience and mystical humility are significant outcomes of the mystical experience of unity.

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