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The Symbolic of Divine Ladder: A Paradigm of Comparative Theology between Sufism and Hesychasm¹

Abstract

This study highlights the paradigm of Divine Ladder as a common meeting place of two ascetic traditions, orthodox hesychasm and Sufism. Suitable representatives for this argument are two distinguished ascetic writers, John the Sinai father with his famous work *Climax* and the Persian poet Jalaladdin Rumi with his remarkable text *Masnavi* or *Mathnawi*. The symbolic of ascetical development which is hidden in both of these texts is interpreted according to dogmatic presuppositions of both



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religions, of orthodox spirituality and the mystical tradition of Islam. Parallels points in various stages on the way to spiritual fulfillment between the two texts indeed do exist, however each one of the authors has a different perception of his ascetic goal regarding to his dogmatic commitment. In fact the main contradiction between the two authors is the idea of body and its approach in the two texts. If for Rumi, body is a false self which has to be weakened in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment then for Climacus stands at the same valuable level as the soul.

Keywords

Climax, Masnavi, Hesychasm, Sufism, Asceticism, Spirituality

Introduction

In this text, I am attempting to study comparatively the symbolic of Divine ladder², as a method of spiritual development in the context of hesychastic gnoseology of the traditions of Sufism and Hesychasm. Hesychastic lifestyle within Christianity and Islam was developed as a reaction and sort of an answer to the secularization of religious reality by seeking, at the same time, the real experience³. Monks of both traditions, thus, resort to the desert, foundate communities and devote themselves in ascetic lifestyle so as to battle against their passions and to get closer to the divine. Sufism, which is

² For the meaning of Divine Ladder as a symbol of spiritual evolution, see A. B. Cook, *Zeus. A Study in Ancient Religion*, vol. II, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1925), pp. 114-140.

³ See P. Brown, *Ο κόσμος της ύστερης αρχαιότητας 150-750 μ. Χ.*, trans. E. Stambogli, (Athens: Alexandria 1998), pp. 104-116; G. Ziakas, *Ιστορία των Θρησκευμάτων Β'. Το Ισλάμ*, (Thessaloniki: P. Pournaras, 2002), pp. 417-422.

subsequent to Hesychasm, was naturally influenced by the latter regarding not only its adopted practices (fasting, mental prayer) but its theoretical background⁴ as well. It is also maintained that even its own name, “*sufi*”⁵ is derived from hesychastic tradition.

Dogmatic differences of the two traditions are taken for granted and do not allow a religious co-existence, however, through the comparative example I am attempting to demonstrate that hesychastic lifestyle, as the real innermost experience, is able to serve as a meeting place of the two religions. To achieve this goal, I decided to study the symbolic of Divine Ladder, as a method of asceticism and spiritual development which represents a common point of reference in both religions. Representatives for this cause are John Climacus⁶ with his

⁴ See A. Yannoulatos, *Ισλάμ*, (Athens: Akritas, 2006), pp. 361-362.

⁵ See G. Ziakas, *Ιστορία των Θρησκευμάτων Β΄. Το Ισλάμ*, p. 418.

⁶ For the life and work of Climacus, see *Vita compendio conscripta abbatis Joannis antiglitis sancti montis Sina, cognomento Scholastici vere sancti, a Daniele monacho, viro venerando el vertate conspicuo, e coenobio Rhaitheno*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca, cursus completus*, (Tomus LXXXVIII, Paris: Garnier Frates, 1860), p. 596-612; P. K. Christou, «Ιωάννης», *ΘΗΕ 6* (1965), pp. 1211-1213; idem, *Πατρολογία Ε΄*, (Thessaloniki: Kiromanos, 2006), pp. 418-423; The very interesting study by S. N. Sakkos, *Περί Αναστασιών Σιναϊτών*, (Thessaloniki: 1964), pp. 179-185, which asserts that John Climacus lived in 6th century and not in 7th as Nau maintained. The opposite view is expressed by D. Bogdanovic, *Jean Climaque dans la litterature byzantine et la literature serbe ancienne*, (Institut d'Etudes Byzantines, Monographies, Fascicule 11: Belgrade, 1968), french translation included, pp. 216-217; G. Couilleau, “Jean Climaque (saint)”, *DS VII* (1974) Paris, pp. 371-372; K. Ware, *Introduction in John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 2-6; J. Chrysavgis, *John Climacus. From the Egyptian Desert to the Sianaite Mountain*, (Hants: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 15-20; I. Hauserr, *Etudes de Spiritualite Orientale*, (Rome: OCA 183, 1969), p. 361; L. Petit, “Jean Climaque (saint)”, *DTC VIII* (1924) Paris, p. 690; J. L. Zecher, *The Symbolics of Death and the Construction of Christian Asceticism: Greek Patristic Voices from the Fourth through Seventh Centuries*, Doctoral thesis, (Durham University 2011), pp. 184-185; G. Florovsky, *The Byzantine*

remarkable work entitled Climax and Jalaladdin Rumi⁷ and his work entitled Mathnawi or Masnavi.

1 Saint John's Climax

John is known and honoured by orthodox church for his work entitled Climax, a text with which the saint was identified and was given the title "*Climacus*"⁸. This name is also the title of his work that he sent at John, an abbot of Raithou cloister. John had requested from Climacus to write, as a new Moses, the "*Spiritual tables of virtues*"⁹. The word Climax is inspired - as Climacus himself writes in a letter attached at the end of the text - from Jacob's vision¹⁰. This text is divided in thirty chapters and as Climacus states they are as many as the years

Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers, Collected Works v. 10, (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1973-; vols. I-IV), (Vaduz: Bóchervertreibsanstalt, 1987 - 9, vols. VI-XIV), p. 397.

⁷ For the life and activities of Jalaladdin Rumi known as Maulana (a teacher of Sufism) see G. Ziakas, *Ο μυστικός ποιητής Maulana Jalaladdin Rumi και η διδασκαλία του*, (Thessaloniki: P. Pournaras, 1996), p. 33-90; E. Turkmen, *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi. Including his Life and Works*, (Konya: Eris, 2004), pp. 1-64.

⁸ See I. Fountoulis, *Λειτουργικά θέματα Δ'*, (Thessaloniki, 1979), p. 80: "and this is because he, John is the "Climax of virtues", who delivers the souls in the holy glory as the secret hymnographs say". Cf. Kathisma at ode c' 30 March: "*Oh John, Climax of virtues*".

⁹ See S. J. Scholastici, Climaci, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus LXXXVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1860), p. 624B.

¹⁰ Regarding symbolism of the word Divine Ladder, John is influenced not only by the biblical meaning of the word but by the interpretation of fathers who preceded him as well and particular Gregory the Theologian when he sings the praises of Basil the Great. See S. G. Theologi, *Orationes, Oratio XLIII, Funeris oratio in laudem Basilii Magni Caesareae in Cappadocia episcopi*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXVI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1885), p. 592C-593A.

Jesus lived in silence¹¹. Also, despite the erroneous dominant impression that the text is meant only for monks, the author himself assures us for the opposite¹². It is worthily noted that the influence of this particular work had and continues to have such a dynamic in east Christian world, similar to that of the work *The imitation of Christ* of Thomas Kempis in West¹³. The translation work regarding Climax is wide and includes ten languages in the entire world¹⁴. John's Climax being a point of reference and referring to symbolic was so influential that it is portrayed in many icons, hagiographies and illustrated texts¹⁵. Climax represents the first systematization of precedent ascetic tradition¹⁶ and for this reason Climacus is mutatis mutandis compared to John Damascinus and his respective dogmatic work *Ἐκδοσι ἀκριβῆς τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως*¹⁷. Indeed, Climacus considers himself a second class architect¹⁸ bringing

¹¹ See J. Scholastici, *Climaci*, p. 629C.

¹² See J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. 1.21: "Some people living carelessly in the world have asked me: 'We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we lead the solitary life?' I replied to them: 'Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate any one; be sure you go to church; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man's domestic happiness; and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven'".

¹³ See K. Ware, *Introduction*, p. 1.

¹⁴ See A. Ignatios, *Του ὁσίου Πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἰωάννου του Σιναΐτου Κλίμαξ*, Introduction, H. M. Paraklitou, (Oropos Atikis, 2009, 11th edn.), pp. 12-14.

¹⁵ For more information see J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954).

¹⁶ See H. R. Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus. Rhetorical Argumentation, Literary Convention and the Tradition of Monastic Formation*, (Lund University, 2007), p. 208.

¹⁷ See H. R. Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus*, p. 182.

¹⁸ See J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 27.30.

in mind Syrian father's familiar apothegm “ἐρῶ τοιγαροῦν ἐμόν οὐδέν”¹⁹. The scheme of categorization of passions-virtues in chapters Sinai father uses is adopted by the precedent greek-roman tradition²⁰. Sixteen out of the thirty chapters are about subjects concerning passions while the rest fourteen are entitled chapters of virtues.

For the structural working out of the text, has been interested very much the research field both theological and philosophical, a fact indicative of the importance of this text. G. Couilleau was the first to present a diptych scheme of understanding Climax, the center of which is the fifteenth chapter entitled *about chastity*²¹. G. Couilleau maintains that in the text there is a dialectical logic between first and final chapters. Specifically, chapters 1-3 of the first part (separation from world) reflect the last 27-30 (unification with God). The same logic exists between chapters 4-7 (fundamental virtues) and 24-26 (crowning virtues). At the third part (asceticism against passions) chapters 8-13 regarding unnatural passions are collated with chapters 18-23 about spiritual passions. At the centre there are the natural passions 14-17 the centre of which is the fifteenth chapter²²:

1st SCHEME

I. Separation from world

1. Renunciation
2. Abandonment
3. Expatriation

¹⁹ J. Damasceni, *Dialectica*, in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus*, (Tomus XCIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1864), p. 533A.

²⁰ See H. R. Johnsen, *Reading John Climacus*, p. 9.

²¹ See J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 15.90: “This is the fifteenth reward of victory. He who has received it while still living in the flesh has died and risen, and from now on experiences the foretaste of future immortality”.

²² See G. Couilleau, *Jean Climaque (saint)*, pp. 373-380.

II. Fundamental virtues

- 4. Obedience
- 5. Repetance
- 6. Memory of death
- 7. Mourning

III. Asceticism against passions

- 8. Self-restraint and Placidity
 - 9. Resentment
 - 10. Denigration
 - 11. Garrulity and Silence
 - 12. Lie
 - 13. Neglect
- } Unnatural Passions

- 14. Voracity
 - 15. Chastity and Prudence
 - 16. Avarice
 - 17. Landlessness
- } Natural Passions

- 18. Insensibility
 - 19. Sleep
 - 20. Insomnia
 - 21. Cowardice
 - 22. Vanity
 - 23. Pride and Blasphemy
- } Spiritual Passions

IV. Crowning Virtues

- 24. Simplicity, Humbleness, Innocence
- 25. Humility
- 26. Discernment

V. Unification with God

- 27. Silence
- 28. Prayer
- 29. Apathy
- 30. Love

Most of the researchers of Climax such as K. Ware and J. Chryssavgis appropriate G. Couilleau's scheme by adding only the trilateral ascetic course a) separation from world b) practice and c) theory, a scheme appertaining to this of Evagrios²³:

2nd SCHEME

I. Separation from world

1. Renunciation
2. Abandonment
3. Expatriation

B. Natural-Material Passions

14. Voracity
15. Pleasure
- 16-17. Avarice

II. Practical Life

(i) Fundamental Virtues

4. Obedience
5. Repentance
6. Memory of death
7. Mourning

C. Unnatural Passions

- 18-20. Insensibility
21. Cowardice
22. Vanity
23. Pride and Blasphemy

(ii) Superior Virtues

24. Simplicity
25. Humiliation
26. Discernment

Asceticism against Passions

A. Unnatural Passions

8. Wrath
9. Resentment
10. Denigration
11. Garrulity
12. Lie
13. Neglect

III. Practical Life-Unification with God

27. Silence
28. Prayer
29. Apathy
30. Love

²³ K. Ware proposes a scheme which helps the reader to become familiar with the structure of the text. K. Ware's addition is followed by J. Chryssavgis and H. R. Johnsen, see K. Ware, *Introduction*, pp. 12-13. For more information about the schemes which have been proposed by other researchers of the Climax, see my own master thesis, *Δόγμα και Πνευματικότητα στον Άγιο Ιωάννη της Κλίμακος*, (unpublished Master Thesis: Aristotle University Thessaloniki, 2012), pp. 19-22.

2 Jalaladdin Rumi's Mathnawi

Jalaladdin Rumi's Mathnawi is called Persia's Koran²⁴ and its author is one of the greatest secret poets²⁵. His work is divided into 6 books and contains 26.000 double lyrics²⁶. The author did not give a specific structure in this work by dividing it into chapters, on the contrary, it is about a total of independent stories with mythical and philosophical content, written in poetic language. The work's title derives from the poetic title-kind of Mathnawi which is appropriated by the author²⁷. It was written between 1263 and 1273 the date of Rumi's death. This work has a great literary value and was translated in many languages most known of which is the english translation of R. A. Nicholson²⁸.

The work's structure appears to be loose, something that is usual in persian poetry. Apart from the fact that it is divided into six books which are subdivided into various titles referring to each and every poem-story, the quest of a specific structure in the work is impossible²⁹. On the contrary, it is about a dissertation of moral character whose purpose is to induce the

²⁴ See G. Ziakas, *Ο μυστικός ποιητής Maulana Jalaladdin Rumi και η διδασκαλία του*, p. 75.

²⁵ See L. Mistakidou, *Νεοπλατωνικά στοιχεία στο Μεσενβί του Τζελαλεττίν Ρουμί και η κοινωνία των Μεβλεβηδών*, (Doctoral thesis, Panteio University of Athens 2002), p. 11.

²⁶ See S. G. Safavi, *The Structure of Rumi's Mathnawi: New Interpretation of the Mathnawi, as a Book for Love and Peace*, (London Academy of Iranian Studies, 2005), p. 5.

²⁷ See G. Ziakas, *Ο μυστικός ποιητής Maulana Jalaladdin Rumi και η διδασκαλία του*, p. 76.

²⁸ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, 8 vols. (London, U. K.: Luzac, 1925-1940).

²⁹ However, S. G. Safavi tried to present a structural scheme that permeates Masnavi's first book and consists of a parallelism and a crosswise train between stories. He, also, maintains that this structure can be found in all the six Masnavi's books, see S. G. Safavi, *The Structure of Rumi's Mathnawi*, pp. 250-253.

reader to get to a reducing connection with the divine. Divine Ladder's scheme, as symbol of spiritual development appears at this particular work to be based on the divine love, although, the train of phases is unclarified³⁰.

Nonetheless, E. Turkmen in his scholarly work *The essence of Rumi's Masnevi* attempted to present a structural scheme of work's understanding with a terraced train which appertains, in a way, to Sinait father's Divine Ladder. Specifically, E. Turkmen maintains that the first 18 lyrics of Mathnawi's³¹ first

³⁰ See A. Schimmel, "Rumi Jalal Al-Din" *Encyclopedia of Religion* v.12 (Thomson Gale, 2005), p. 7937: "Love is personified under different guises—Rumi sees it as a police officer who enacts confiscation of humanity's goods or as a carpenter who builds a ladder to heaven, as a ragpicker who carries away everything old from the house of the heart, or as a loving mother, as a dragon or a unicorn, as an ocean of fire or a white falcon, to mention only a few of the images of this strongest power of life"; J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, I/303-304: "The worldly sense is the ladder to this world; the religious sense is the ladder to Heaven. Seek ye the well-being of the former sense from the physician; beg ye the well-being of the latter sense from the Beloved".

³¹ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, I/1-18: "Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations Saying, Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan. I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire. Everyone who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it. In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy and with them that rejoice. Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me. My secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended). Body is not veiled from soul, nor soul from body, yet none is permitted to see the soul. This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind: whoso hath not this fire, may he be naught! 'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervor of Love that is in the wine. The reed is the comrade of everyone who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts. Who ever saw a poison and antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a sympathizer and a longing lover like the reed? The reed tells of the Way full of blood and recounts stories of the passion of Majnūn. Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer save the ear. In our woe the days (of life) have become untimely: our days

book constitute a scheme of understanding of the entire work and allow us to divide Masnavi into eighteen steps of unification with God³². He suggests a nine-phased scheme of work's perception whose titles will be given by himself. This specific scheme is the following³³:

1. The state of an immature man (a materialistic man).
2. The awakening (searching for daily bread or spiritual food).
3. The desire and quest (feeling of separation from the Origin like that of the Ney).
4. Indifference to worldly riches (Majnun's submission).
5. Divine Love (the blood stained path of love).
6. Devotion and sacrifice.
7. Bewilderment (tearing of veils).
8. Observation of God in every phenomenon.
9. Unification.

3 Climax and Mathnawi. A common meeting place with different targeting

E. Turkmen's scheme allows us to interpret Mathnawi text as a road to unification with God whose steps are staggering gradually from one level to another. Based on E. Turkmen's

travel hand in hand with burning grieves. If our days are gone, let them go!—'tis no matter. Do Thou remain, for none is holy as Thou art! Whoever is not a fish becomes sated with His water; whoever is without daily bread finds the day long. None that is raw understands the state of the ripe: therefore my words must be brief. Farewell!"

³² See E. Turkmen, *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi*, p. 65. At this point, it is worth mentioning that there is a tendency to weave a veil of myth around the writing of the first eighteen lyrics, a fact that attaches a greater weight to the significance of the rest of this work. For more details See L. Mistakidou, *Νεοπλατωνικά στοιχεία στο Μεσνεβί του Τζελαλεττίν Ρουμί και η κοινωνία των Μεβλεβηδών*, pp. 21, 65.

³³ See E. Turkmen, *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi*, p. 75.

interpretation, we can compare both texts so as to the points which constitute a meeting place of the two traditions by referring simultaneously to their dogmatic principles. I consider that this example will serve as a fertile ground for dialogue between the two religions and that it will contribute to the better understanding of their dogmatic beliefs. The method I am going to follow is based on the comparison between each phase of E. Turkmen's scheme and the respective phases of Climax according to the 2nd scheme³⁴.

The first phase - *The state of an immature man (a materialistic man)* - can be compared to the first three chapters of Climax which are entitled *separation form world*. Rumi invites the reader to a separation from world similar to the invitation of Sinait father. Nonetheless, separation has different incentive for each author because for Climacus separation means renunciation of secular life and entry in ascetic arena of monastic life, while for the persian poet separation is interpreted as exit from material world. If we want to understand better the difference between two texts we have to bear in mind that for Rumi present word is not the real one, but a depiction of the real world, which is found in the spiritual world. Persian poet's theology is directly depended on Neo-Platonism and as a result, material world which is the result of effusion from neoplatonic One is considered not only non-existent but vicious as well³⁵. The extract from Mathnawi corroborates this belief:

³⁴ This particular scheme was chosen as the most appropriate because it is used frequently in bibliography. Besides, the same scheme is used by K. Ware who was the first to detect common elements between John Climacus' sententious writing and Sufism, see K. Ware, *Introduction*, p. 9.

³⁵ See L. Mistakidou, *Νεοπλατωνικά στοιχεία στο Μεσνεβί του Τζελαλεττίν Ρουμί και η κοινωνία των Μεβλεβηδών*, pp. 58-59, 113, 131. Cf. G. Ziakas, «Η έννοια της ελευθερίας της βουλήσεως και του κακού εις τον μεταγενέστερον Ισλαμικό μυστικισμόν», *ΕΕΘΣΑΠΘ* vol. 18, (Thessaloniki, 1973), p. 472 and particularly p. 492: „Hell is the

“Parable of the world (really) existent that appears non-existent and the world (really) non-existent that appears existent. He (God) hath caused the non-existent to appear existent and magnificent; He hath caused the existent to appear in the form of non-existence. He hath concealed the Sea and made the foam visible; He hath concealed the Wind and displayed to thee the dust. The dust is whirling in the air, (high) as a minaret: how should the dust rise aloft of itself? Thou seest the dust on high, O infirm (of sight): the Wind (thou seest) not, except through knowledge given by induction”³⁶.

On the contrary, in Climax the escape from a vicious world does not occur because John's quill, which is consistent with orthodox theology, denies to characterize present world as vicious and, by extension, nature as something rejectable and wicked³⁷. In the 26th chapter which is entitled “*On discernment*”, the greatest virtue of all in ascetic orthodox tradition we read: “[v]ice or passion is not originally planted in nature, for God is not the Creator of passions”³⁸. Also in a further point Climacus writes “God is not the cause or the creator of evil, and those who say that certain passions are natural to the soul have been deceived not knowing that we have turned the constituent qualities of nature into passions”³⁹. From these quotes we are in position to realize that Climacus stands against any kind of manichaeism which takes for granted that the world is vicious and evil for the entire manhood, on the contrary it is clearly understood that God does not create malevolence and even

present life as an expression of detachment of the being from his origin. But when the beings return to their foundation, then they will regain the beatitude of the union”.

³⁶ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, V/ 1026-1029.

³⁷ See C. Yannaras, *Η μεταφυσική του σώματος. Σπουδή στον Ιωάννη της Κλίμακος*, (Athens: Dodoni, 1971), p. 134f.

³⁸ J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 26.67.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 26.156.

more the creation in its wholeness is an act of kindness and generosity for humanity.

In the next three phases of E. Turkmen's scheme - *The awakening (searching for daily bread or spiritual food, The desire and quest (feeling of separation from the Origin like that of the Ney), Indifference to worldly riches (Majnun's submission)* – persian poet sets the scope of ascetic's goal which is the quest of spiritual food, an element appertaining to Climax as practical life. Asceticism against carnal passions is the common element of two texts and a frequent meeting place of the two religions⁴⁰, however, the perspective is different. If, in Climax, practical life, for someone, is the field of asceticism aiming at the receiving of God's grace in order for him to continue struggling, in other words, a dialectic of exertion and endowment that conveys the entire John's text⁴¹, for Rumi asceticism is the demotion of body as the prison of the soul⁴².

For a better understanding of asceticism against body which is perceived as an enemy of the soul in Sufism's teaching, we have bear in mind the theory about nafs, in other words, the conception of body as a lesser self-compared to spirit⁴³. This perception of body as virtual and false reality rather than the real self which is soul, is clearly seen in the last book of Rumi's Mathnawi: "Be afraid of the existence in which you are now:

⁴⁰ See H. Nasr, "Η προσευχή της καρδιάς στον Ησυχασμό και τον Σουφισμό", *Σύναξη* 27, p. 75 (69-77).

⁴¹ See K. Ware, *Introduction*, p. 18.

⁴² For the consideration of body as prison of the soul in Rumi's teaching See L. Mistakidou, *Νεοπλατωνικά στοιχεία στο Μεσνεβί του Τζελαλεττίν Ρουμί και η κοινωνία των Μεβλεβηδών*, p. 135.

⁴³ For more see R. Nicholson, *Οι μυστικοί των Σούφι*, (Athens: Pirinos Kosmos, 1985), pp. 39-41: "Sufi masters have created as the years go by, an ascetic system of moral cultivation that bases at the point of the existence of evil in human, which is the lower state of the soul. This kind of evil in the Sufi's teaching it is called by the name nafs. It may be resemble with the flesh and her partners, the world and the devil, the most dangerous enemies of the divine-human connection".

that phantasy of yours is nothing and you (yourself) are nothing. One nothing has fallen in love with another nothing: has any naught ever waylaid (and attacked) any other naught? When these phantasies have departed from before you that which your understanding hath not conceived becomes clear to you"⁴⁴.

In contrast to this polemical point of Rumi's view, Climacus has a total different aspect for the human because his anthropology is stated in the Christological dogma of Chalcedon. If the hypostasis of Christ is acknowledged in two natures then *mutatis mutandis* human personality is consisted in soul and body. Climacus defends this position and proclaims that "[h]ypocrisy is a contrary state of body and soul interwoven with every kind of subterfuge"⁴⁵. Also for a better realization of human personality as the consequence of the combination between body and soul he asserts: "For the soul becomes like its bodily occupations. It conforms itself to its activities and takes its shape from them"⁴⁶. From the above quote, it is evident that Climacus wants the body to rise to soul's level of value by fighting against any duality that wants the latter to be superior to the former⁴⁷. Indeed, body is connected with soul, to such extent, that mental conditions become corporal and vice-versa.

The 5th phase of E. Turkmen's scheme, *Divine Love (the blood stained path of love)* appertains, to some extent, to the fifteenth chapter of Climax about *chastity* both of which are placed in the middle of each scheme respectively. I observed that in G. Couilleau's scheme (1st scheme) that *chastity* serves as the

⁴⁴ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, VI/ 1447-1449.

⁴⁵ J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 24.16.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 25.58.

⁴⁷ At this point, John goes contrary to Origen's and mostly to Evagrius' dualism, concerning the exit of mind-soul from a wicked word appertaining to material reality. For more see I. Meyendorff, *Βυζαντινή Θεολογία*, trans. edit. F. P. Koumarios & B. Tsagkalos, (Athens: Indiktos, 2010), pp. 69-71.

center of diptych scheme because it is the climax of practical virtues and the incentive of crowning spiritual virtues, a fact similar to the Christological proposal of Chalcedon regarding the two natures, divine and human of Christ's one and only person. The placing of this particular phase in the middle of E. Turkmen's scheme do not allow me to make such an interpretation⁴⁸, however, the resemblance between the two schemes rests with the fact that divine love, as a prerequisite for the continuation of ascension, is placed in the middle. As for Climacus, the hermit who wants to carry on ascending the Climax has to deliver himself from carnal love, an element we see at Rumi's teaching as a transformation of carnal love into a divine one⁴⁹.

Next two phases *Devotion and sacrifice* and *Bewilderment (tearing of veils)* chapters appertain to chapters *about humiliation* and *discernment* in Climax. In the first phase, sufist is obliged to humiliate his lesser (carnal) self so as for his internal spiritual self to be risen. In the second, there is a pressing need for quest of a spiritual guide-venerable father so as for the road of encounter with God to be safe. Rumi's text bear a stunning resemblance to that of John's in the matter of spiritual leader's quest, a fact that has been pointed out in recent bibliography, during my research, as a common meeting

⁴⁸ See A. Yannoulatos, *Ίχνη από την αναζήτηση του υπερβατικού*, (Athens: Akritas 2006 3rd edn.), p. 237: "The position that has in the Christian theology Christ as Divine Word of God, takes Coran in the Islam tradition".

⁴⁹ See E. Turken, *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi*, p. 243: "The major theme of the six volumes of Rumi's Masnevi is the love of God. The Masnevi is actually a love letter written to the Unseen Beloved Love is neither touchable nor perceptible by the carnal senses, therefore, carnal love can be explained only by divine love". For the meaning of erotic language in Masnevi see M. Tourage, *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism*, (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2007).

place of the two hesychastic waves⁵⁰. I cite two extracts from Mathnawi, which revealing the importance of the matter: “For consultation, some goodly and (spiritually) living person is required, that he may make thee living; and where is that living one (to be found)?”⁵¹. “Ask the meaning of the Qur’án from the Qur’án alone, and from that one who has set fire to (and extinguished) his idle fancy, And has become a sacrifice to the Qur’án and is (laid) low (in self-abasement), so that the Qur’án has become the essence of his spirit”⁵².

Unlike Rumi, Climacus acknowledges the importance of the spiritual father in a first level but his interest goes in another reality. Especially, as we can see from the below quotation the importance for the Sinai father lies in the humility of the monk who humbles himself before the elder and not so much in the spirituality of the latter, because spiritual father might be even an unpleasant person.

“Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed to God with faith and honest simplicity, and having asked the fathers or even the brothers with humility of heart and no thought of doubt, they should accept their advice as from the mouth of God, even if their advice be contrary to their own view, and even if those consulted are not very spiritual.”⁵³

The eighth phase *Observation of God in every phenomenon* is compared to the chapter about *apathy*, however, at this specific phase dogmatic differences of both texts are conspicuous. If *apathy*, for Climacus, is the liberation from passions, as the final result of purgation in order for the hermit to receive God's favor as Sinai father asserts: “[s]ome say, moreover, that

⁵⁰ See J. S. Cutsinger (Ed.), *Paths to the Heart. Sufism and the Christian East*, (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), p. viii.

⁵¹ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, IV/ 2209.

⁵² *Ibidem*, V/ 3128-3129.

⁵³ J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 26.111.

dispassion is the resurrection of the soul before the body; but others, that it is the perfect knowledge of God, second only to that of the angels"⁵⁴, for Rumi there is another reality. Persian poet teaching consistent with its neoplatonic background interprets this situation as the apocalypse of divine substance which is being emerged beneath phenomenal world. As a result, apathy for Rumi is the conquest of man that considers stigma of divine reality to be the divine light beneath illusory material world⁵⁵.

The final phase in E. Turkmen's scheme is the *unification with God* which is the ultimate cause for sufism, but not a unification at which the two hypostases (divine and human) are distinguished⁵⁶. To fully comprehend the theory about unification in Rumi's teaching, one should bear in mind the terms *fana* (self-annihilation) and *baqa* (perpetual residence in God)⁵⁷, so as to understand ascetics will to diminish the will itself and to be embodied in the divine. Masnavi's extracts below are indicative:

“O brother, endure the pain of the lancet that you may escape from the poison of your miscreant self (*nafs*), for sky and sun and moon bow in worship to the people who have escaped from self-existence. Since his heart has learned to light the candle (of spiritual knowledge and love), the sun cannot burn him. What is (the meaning of) to learn the knowledge of God's unity? To consume yourself in the presence of the One”⁵⁸.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, pp. 29.4.

⁵⁵ See E. Turkmen, *The Essence of Rumi's Masnevi*, p. 331: “It is the spiritual essence which when discovered within our self or in other things lead us to Unity where neither form nor existence is left”.

⁵⁶ See R. Nicholson, *Η έννοια του προσώπου στον Σουφισμό*, trans. N. Koufakis-N. Samothraki, (Athens: Armos, 2010), p. 102f.

⁵⁷ For these particular notions in sufistic teaching see G. Ziakas, *Ο μυστικός ποιητής Maulana Jalaladdin Rumi και η διδασκαλία του*, p. 228 etc.

⁵⁸ J. Rumi, *Mathnawi*, I/ 3002-3003-3005-30009.

Contrariwise, the end of the Climax is the deification of man even from this life, through the virtue of obedience to the will of the spiritual father, as the exercise of the willpower based on the Christological prototype. In John's Climax the final step is entitled *about love, hope and faith* and interprets hermit's last phase which is the participation in the uncreated energies of divine love which do not immerse man in the divine beatitude but, on the contrary, illuminate him body and soul. In Climax we read: "So when the whole man is in a manner commingled with the love of God, then even his outward appearance in the body, as in a kind of mirror, shows the splendor of his soul. That is how Moses who had looked upon God was glorified"⁵⁹.

Conclusion

In this text, I attempted to approach, through a paradigm of comparative theology, Divine Ladder's symbolic as a common meeting place of two hesychastic texts meaning John's Climax and Rumi' Mathnawi. Given the dogmatic differences between the two religions, I encountered several differences between the two texts indicating that the two authors are characterized by a different theological thought.

However, the element that appears to be a meeting place of two religions is asceticism as a practical method of encountering the divine. In an era when the request for meeting of two religions and real dialogue between them, aiming at the mutual understanding and co-existence, the ascetic way as commonly accepted appears to be an important perspective for this meeting. In my study I observed that both John and Rumi considerate ascetic lifestyle as the only exit from passions that hook man and hold him captive in a depressing reality. Therefore, asceticism can, not only, constitute a perpendicular

⁵⁹ J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 30.17.

pathway of encounter with the divine but, also, built a bridge of communication with the other person standing, always, opposite to us.

In conclusion it is necessary to say that taking for granted the scheme of Divine Ladder in both traditions without the appropriate presuppositions is like walking into shaky ground. It was E. Turkmen's of Mathnawi that led me in parallel view with the text of Climax as ascension and not the Mathnawi itself. However, none of the two schemes of Climax that I have presented is suitable for interpreting the Climax in its fullness. J. L. Zecher argues that Sinai father had not in mind any of these figures when he wrote Climax⁶⁰. This particular argument of J. L. Zecher is found in the fact that Climax is not the scale as he says himself, but a call to Christian formation for self-identity through imitation of Christ's life⁶¹. At this point I consider that the model of imitation of Christ may be intended for the reading of Climax, however, does not fully meet the innermost reality of the text. The imitation of Christ more akin to a moral model of ascetic life that does not fit perfectly with the orthodox theology. For this reason I believe that although the successful proposal J. L. Zecher to interpret the text holistically, but the approach of the reader should not be only the imitation of Christ, but an ontological participation in the body of Christ. In other words, Climacus does not call in a moral imitation but a pilgrimage of Christ's life⁶², allowing reader to identify, as Climacus himself did, Climax with Christ⁶³.

⁶⁰ See J. L. Zecher, *The Symbolics of Death and the Construction of Christian Asceticism*, p. 194.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 238.

⁶² See. K. Ware, *Introduction*, p. 8.

⁶³ See J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, pp. 30.36: "Run, I beseech you, with him who said: Let us hasten until we attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, who, when He was baptized in the thirtieth year of His visible age, attained the thirtieth step in the spiritual ladder".