

Themes of Love in Islamic Mystical Theology

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The Qur'an has remained a living fount of inspiration from the outset of the tradition. Its exegesis has always been an important genre, but more than that, every approach to learning with any claim to Islamicity looks back to it. Each approach, however, is colored by its own goals and methodologies. Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), for example, studies the Qur'an as the primary source for Islamic law and, given the importance of right practice, has played a major role in the community. Nonetheless, it has nothing to say about the Qur'anic worldview, for the simple reason that jurists qua jurists have no interest in the world. Scholars who did investigate the world wrote about issues like God and his attributes, his relationship with the cosmos, his purpose in creating the universe, the unique status of human beings among creatures, the role of the prophets, the nature of salvation, and the stages of posthumous becoming. In their investigations they typically employed one of three broad methodologies—dialectical theology (*kalām*), philosophy, or Sufism (*tasawwuf*)—each of which has had many different schools.

The third of these, Sufism, has no clear definition. Those who use the word do not agree on what exactly it is, nor on how to differentiate it from dialectical theology or philosophy. Many Western specialists and most non-specialists put it into the category of mysticism, but, given the vagueness of the term mysticism and the vast range of teachings and practices associated with Sufism over Islamic history, this is problematic.¹ For the purposes of this essay, I take “mystical theology” as a designation for the Sufi approach to the Qur'an, which entails focus on the issue of transforming the soul with the aim of bringing it into conformity with its divine prototype.

Teachers of Sufism were often well versed in dialectical theology and/or philosophy, not to speak of jurisprudence, but they understood book learning as preliminary to the real task, which is to know things for oneself and to become what human beings were created to be. Many of these teachers wrote prolifically, while others never put pen to paper, instead devoting themselves to guiding students and disciples on the path to God. Sufi literature is extraordinarily rich and has been so ever since the ninth and tenth centuries, when the various approaches to Islamic learning came to be differentiated.

Given the stress that Sufi teachers have placed on transforming the soul, it should not be surprising that love has been one of their favorite themes. No other shared human

experience has the same power to change a person's priorities. Sufi explanations of love's role in the relationship between man and God can provide us with a rather clear sense of how their approach differed from that of other schools of thought, especially jurisprudence, which has so often been mischaracterized as the core of the Islamic tradition. Specifically, I want to look at why many of them saw love as the heart of the Qur'an's message. Why, for example, would someone call the Qur'an a "book of love" (ishq-nāma)? This is certainly not an expression a jurist or an Orientalist would have used. It is taken from a saying of the mysterious Shams-i Tabrīzī, famous for his sudden appearance in the life of Rūmī (d. 1273) and his equally sudden disappearance. As is well known, he was instrumental in Rūmī's transformation from a rather staid scholar into one of the greatest poets of human history.²

To make sense of this saying of Shams, we need to review the manner in which the Qur'an was regarded, not least the fact that it presents itself and was understood as the very speech of God. In other words, Muslims read it as God's self-expression, his disclosure of his own nature, his explanation of who he is, what he does, and what he wants. When the author of the book talks about the universe and human beings, he does so in function of himself. He has no interest in the world and human affairs per se, for the simple reason that, from his point of view, nothing whatsoever exists on its own. All things are simply, as he puts it, "signs" (āyāt) showing forth his own reality.

Muslim scholars were well aware that readers of the Qur'an drew many diverse and even conflicting conclusions from the text. Nowadays it is a commonplace of hermeneutical theory to say that people look at things through their own lenses, but there was nothing strange about this idea a thousand years ago. Shams explained why most people fail to see the Qur'an as a book of love in these terms: "The flaw is that they do not look at God with the gaze of love. They look at Him with the gaze of learning, or the gaze of science, or the gaze of philosophy. The gaze of love is something else."³

The Two Commands

The Qur'an's basic teachings about God, the universe, and man can be boiled down to what are commonly called the three "principles" (asl) of faith: the unity of God (tawhīd), prophecy (nubuwwa), and the return (ma'ād). In succinct terms, the first principle means that "There is no god but God," the second that "Muhammad is God's messenger," and the third that everything comes from God and goes back where it came from. The first two statements, when recited together and prefaced by the words "I bear witness that," are known as the Shahadah, the act of bearing witness. As most everyone knows, the Shahadah is the first of the five pillars of Islamic practice. The right form of practice is codified by the jurists, but they

have nothing to say about the meaning of the Shahadah. This is addressed by dialectical theology, philosophy, and Sufism.

When the sentence “There is no god but God” is taken on its own, it is called the formula of tawhīd. Literally tawhīd means “saying one,” that is, “declaring God’s unity.” A typical way to understand God is to insert into this formula any name of God found in the Qur’an. For example, the Qur’an says that God is the Living. Hence, “There is nothing alive but God.” In other words, there is no true life but God’s life, and the life experienced by us is not in fact life—if it were, we would never die. Again, the Qur’an says that God is the Knowing. Hence, “There is none knowing but God.” No one truly knows but God, and our knowledge compared to his knowledge is ignorance. As the Qur’an puts it, “They encompass nothing of His knowledge save as He wills” (2:255).

It would be easy to go on in this manner, listing the so-called “ninety-nine” names of God and showing how each asserts the primacy of God’s reality and the dependency of everything else. In each instance we could support the conclusion with Qur’anic verses and prophetic sayings. What is totally clear is that the Qur’an holds that God’s reality is the only reality worthy of the name and it sees everything else as deriving from God, always and forever.

The second principle expands on the notion that Muhammad is God’s messenger, which means also that the Qur’an is God’s message. Part of the message is that God sent a long series of prophets beginning with Adam and ending with Muhammad. The traditional number is 124,000, surely enough to go around. As the Qur’an puts it, “Every community has a messenger” (10:47).

The third principle is that all creatures, having come from their Creator, follow diverse paths leading back to him. The human situation differs from that of others by the presence of a certain degree of free will. This explains why human beings alone are addressed by prophetic messages. Inasmuch as they are free—and the extent to which they are free remains an open question—they will be held responsible, which is to say that everyday choices will have repercussions in posthumous becoming.

In the course of discussing the three principles, the Qur’an differentiates between two sorts of divine command, which later texts sometimes call the “creative command” and the “religious command.”⁴ By means of the first command, God brings the universe into existence. By means of the second, he offers instructions to human beings. The creative command can be understood as a corollary of unity, and the religious command as a corollary of prophecy.

The Qur’an mentions the creative command in several verses, such as, “His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it ‘Be!’, and it comes to be” (36:82). This command is eternal, which means that it lies outside of time, so God is forever issuing it. This is why

Muslim theologians never understood God's creative activity in terms of Deism. The Qur'anic view is that we exist because God is bestowing existence upon us right now, not that we are here because God created the universe some time ago, occasionally intervening in events. Every individual thing, every event, every breath, is the fruit of the word "Be!", a command that is forever coming forth at this very moment, the eternal present.

As for the religious command, it tells people how to act correctly. The Qur'an makes clear that Iblis (Satan) and then Adam were the first to be addressed by it. The refusal of Iblis to prostrate himself before Adam when God commanded him to do so provides the mythic root of disobedience, and this in turn highlights the key difference between the two commands. The religious command can be disobeyed, but the creative command cannot. Given that the religious command is addressed only to Adam and his children (putting aside the question of Iblis and the other jinn), human beings alone have the possibility of disobeying God. Here we meet the perennial issue of freedom and determinism, an endless discussion in Islamic texts as elsewhere.

When God appointed Adam as a prophet, he became the first human intermediary for the religious command. Those who accept the religious command and attempt to put it into practice are called God's "servants" (ʿabd). From the standpoint of the creative command, however, absolutely everything is God's servant, since nothing whatsoever can disobey it. Hence there are two sorts of servanthood in keeping with the two sorts of command. The first is compulsory and pertains to everything in the universe. The second is voluntary inasmuch as those addressed by it have the option of rejecting it. The religious command was issued to the first human being and renewed whenever one of his descendents was appointed as a prophet. It calls upon people to acknowledge that they are compulsory servants of God and then to employ their free will in order to follow his instructions.

Divine Love

In talking about love, the Qur'an uses two words, wudd and hubb (and derivatives), which are typically understood as synonyms.⁵ In the usual lists of divine names, a derivative of wudd is given, al-wadūd. It is commonly explained as an active participle, "loving" or "lover," but the word's grammatical pattern is also used for passive participles. Hence many scholars explained that the name designates God as both lover and beloved. It means that there is no lover but God and no beloved but God. In other words, God alone truly loves, and God alone is the true object of love.

As noted, Shams-i Tabrīzī held that readers will see the Qur'an as a book of love only when they look upon God with the gaze of love and avoid the gazes of jurisprudence, dialectical theology, biology, and critical theory. But what exactly is love? In modern times

most people have thought of it as something wonderful to be sure, but in the end it is an emotion, a psychological vagary, a byproduct of evolution, a social construct, or some other sort of natural or human phenomenon. It belongs to us—we do not belong to it. From the standpoint of the Qur'an, this is to turn things on their heads. It is to start at the bottom rather than at the top. Rūmī expresses the top-down view in this verse:

For the elect, love is a tremendous eternal light;
for the common people, love is form and appetite.⁶

Once God is recognized as the eternal light of love, the utterly basic role of love in all things can be grasped. It is worth noting that this notion of love's essentially divine nature finds explicit expression not only in Sufism, but also in the writings of philosophers like the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā. If the jurists had no interest in love, this is because it cannot be legislated. As for the dialectical theologians, they were hostile toward any suggestion that the transcendent Lord could love his lowly servants, much less vice-versa, so they occupied themselves with proving that God relates to people only in terms of commands and prohibitions, and that people relate to God only in terms of obedience. Dialectical theology was of course much to the liking of jurists, since it provided the rationale for their bread and butter.

Muslim scholars who talked about love agreed that it is indefinable. In discussions of human love, they typically limited themselves to describing its symptoms, characteristics, and consequences. They summarized these along the lines of “yearning for union.” By using the word union, they were saying that the goal of lovers is to come together, not to stay apart. They understood love as the energy that brings about the encounter of God and man. In the technical works of the mystical theologians, the discussions typically remained dry and abstract, accessible only to scholars with years of training. This helps explain why many of the most profound theoreticians of love—such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ in Arabic and Rūmī in Persian—expressed their teachings almost exclusively in poetry, a much more efficacious way of conveying love's transformative power to the community.

Two of the words commonly used for union are wisāl, which means coming together, communion, sexual intercourse; and ittihād, which means reaching oneness after manyness, unification. Dialectical theologians were scandalized by these words and maintained that they compromised God's transcendence. Any attention to the writings of careful scholars who employed them, however, shows that they had sophisticated understandings of what they were saying. Let me cite, for example, a passage from Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, author of The Unveiling of the Mysteries (Kashf al-asrār), one of the longest commentaries on the Qur'an in the Persian language, completed around the year 1130. While explaining the verse, “They measured not God with His true measure” (22:74), Maybudī points out that it means that only

God knows God. Then he says, “Tomorrow [in paradise] when the servants reach the exaltedness of union with Him and see the marks bearing witness to proximity, He will bestow the vision of Himself in the measure of your capacity, not in the measure of His tremendousness and majesty.”⁷ Many passages could be cited from other authors making the same point, whether the discussion concerns the beatific vision in paradise, or the vision of the divine presence here and now.

When we put love in the context of the three principles of faith, we can say that texts discuss it from four basic standpoints: as an eternal reality, as the motive for creation, as the force behind divine guidance, and as the final goal of human becoming.

From the first standpoint, love is understood as identical with God, “before” creation if you like, though this an ontological, not a temporal before. God as love is an absolute unity encompassing every possibility of being. Al-Daylamī (d. ca. 1000), author of what seems to be the earliest Arabic book on love combining theological, philosophical, and Sufi perspectives, explains the first standpoint like this: “The root of love is that God is eternally described by love . . . He loves Himself for Himself in Himself . . . Here lover, beloved, and love are a single thing without division, for He is unity itself, and in unity things are not distinct.”⁸

From the second standpoint, God is viewed as loving the universe. Love is then the attribute that incites him to issue the creative command. Love brings the universe into existence and drives all things toward the full actualization of their own possibilities. In this respect God loves all of creation, and all things are doing exactly what they must do, for he is saying “Be!” to them at each moment. Moreover, all things will return to their loving Creator, each in keeping with its own capacity for love. Hence the third principle of faith, the return to God, is understood as an ontological necessity, and as such it is often called “the compulsory return” (al-rujūʿ al-idtirārī); it follows upon the fact that everything serves the creative command.

From about the twelfth century onward, Sufi authors commonly provided a mythic backdrop for the notion of God’s creative love by citing a conversation between God and David. When David asked God why he created the universe, God replied, “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized.”

The third standpoint looks at love as the divine attribute that incited God to issue the religious command. All things will in any case return to God, but in his love for human beings God sends guidance so that they will recognize his love and respond in kind. People can then employ their freedom in a way that will allow them to return to him such that they fulfill their desire for union. Texts often call this “the voluntary return” (al-rujūʿ al-ikhtiyārī), which correlates with the voluntary servanthood that is the prerogative of human beings.

The fourth standpoint takes the final end of love into account, that is, the achievement of the goal of all lovers, which is to come together and enjoy each other's embrace. In one respect, this standpoint is identical with the first—God in his unity—because union leaves no room for two. At the first stage, however, human beings were potentialities of being and knowing, and in the last stage they will have achieved the actuality of being and knowing, perceiving themselves as the radiance of the Unique Reality without any separate being of their own. Rūmī explains the difference between the two standpoints by saying that in the beginning, we were fish unaware of ourselves and the ocean. Then God threw us on dry land, where everything we do is driven by the search for our lost beloved. Finally God will pull us back into the ocean, and for the first time we will recognize our true nature and our real home.⁹

In short, if we look back to the origin, we see the unity of love, and if we look ahead to the final culmination, we see the union of love. This means that our immediate concern is the two middle stages, since we have departed from unity and have not yet reached union. These two—love as the motive for creation and love as the force behind divine guidance—can be further analyzed by paying close attention to the implications of the two commands.

Of special importance here is a Qur'anic verse that is quoted more than any other in the literature: "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54).¹⁰ This verse sets up the relationship between God and man in four basic statements: God is lover, human beings are the objects of his love, human beings are lovers, and God is the object of their love. If we read these statements from the standpoint of the creative command, the Qur'an is talking about the workings of the realm of being, without reference to free will. If we read them from the standpoint of the religious command, the Qur'an is talking about the role of human freedom in actualizing love. Given that the verse can be read either way, it provides us with eight additional Qur'anic perspectives on love's reality.

Love in the Creative Command

The first statement, "He loves," means that God is a lover. At the initial stage of absolute divine unity, God loves himself, because no others exist, so He is lover, beloved, and love. When we take the divine omniscience into account, we understand that he knows all things for all eternity as concomitants of his knowledge of himself. Thus, in loving himself, he loves everything. In his chapter on love in Giving Life to the Sciences of the Religion (Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn), the great al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) explains the point like this: "When someone loves only himself, his acts, and his compositions, his love does not go outside of his essence and the concomitants of his essence inasmuch as they are connected to his essence. Thus, God loves only Himself."¹¹

Given that God is eternal and unchanging (qadīm), his love is also eternal and unchanging. Created things, however, are newly arrived (muhdath), which is to say that God knows them eternally, but they do not come into existence until he issues the creative command. The Qur'an often refers to the love that drives creation as rahma, mercy or compassion. Etymologically, rahma designates the quality of a rahim, a womb, so its basic sense is a mother's love for her children. A number of prophetic sayings make the connection. For example, "Surely God is more merciful toward His servant than any mother toward her child." Notice that this saying can mean that God is merciful toward all things, for everything in the universe is God's servant. The Qur'an associates universal, compulsory servanthood with the name All-Merciful (rahmān) in the verse, "There is nothing in the heavens and earth that does not come to the All-Merciful as a servant" (19:93). The Qur'an also implies that the name All-Merciful is a synonym for the name God (e.g. 17:110) and says that God's mercy "embraces everything" (7:156). In other words, God is fundamentally merciful and loving, a notion that is reflected in the formula of ritual consecration: "In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful."

Mercy, then, is a kind of love, but mercy and love are not exactly the same thing, for mercy is unidirectional and love mutual. God loves man, and man loves God, but God has mercy on human beings, and human beings cannot have mercy on God. Rather, they must direct their mercy at other creatures. Hence the prophetic saying, "God has no mercy on those who are not merciful toward the people."

One of the mystical theologians who explained the significance of God's eternal love in the language of both scholars and common people was 'Abdallāh Anṣārī (d. 1088), author of several books in both Arabic and Persian, among them the classic Arabic description of the ascending stages of the path to God, Way Stations of the Travelers (Manāzil al-sā'irīn). In Persian he is best known for his whispered prayers (munājāt), in which he frequently appeals to God's eternally loving nature. For example:

O God, where will I find again the day when You belonged to me, and I was not. Until I reach that day, I will be in the midst of fire and smoke. If I find that day again in the two worlds, I will profit. If I find Your Being for myself, I will be pleased with my own nonbeing.

"O God, where was I when You called me? I am not I when You remain for me.

"O God, when You call someone, do not make manifest the offenses that You have concealed!

"O God, You lifted us up and no one said, 'Lift up!' Now that You have lifted up, don't put down! Keep us in the shadow of Your gentleness! Entrust us to none but Your bounty and mercy!"¹²

The verse of mutual love says that God “loves them.” This was understood to mean that God’s love is directed at human beings, who are the only objects of his love mentioned explicitly in the Qur’an. Why he should love them rather than others is much discussed in the literature, often by highlighting love’s connection with beauty (jamāl, husn), which is typically described as that which attracts love. Like love, beauty cannot be defined, but most everyone would agree that people love things because they find them beautiful. The texts do not consider this a result of biology or psychology—the bottom-up explanation—but rather a requisite of the creative command. The Prophet expressed its divine root in the famous saying, “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.”

If God is beautiful, then there is nothing beautiful but God. When God loves, he is loving beauty, and he alone is truly beautiful, so in fact he is loving his own beauty. He does so first by loving himself and second by loving his beauty as reflected in created things. The Qur’an speaks of God’s beauty when it says that he is described by “the most beautiful names” (7:180, 17:110, 20:8, 59:24). It refers to God’s love for creation when it says, “He made all things that He created beautiful” (32:7). As for mankind, it says, “He formed you, and He made your forms beautiful” (40:64). Thus the statement that God loves “them” means that he loves his own beauty as it appears in human beings. And of course the Prophet said, echoing Genesis, “God created Adam in His own form,” that is, in the form of the most beautiful names. As God says in the Qur’an, “We created man in the most beautiful stature” (95:4).

One might say that the overall Islamic understanding of human nature is based on the parallel statements “God loves beauty” and “God loves them.” God loves human beings because they encapsulate and reflect the totality of his own beauty, which is designated by the most beautiful names. They alone were created in the form of God’s all-comprehensive beauty, and they alone were taught “all the names” (2:31). This is why God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam (2:34) and appointed Adam and his children as vicegerents (2:30, 35:39), that is, his representatives in creation.

Sufi authors who talked about God as a Hidden Treasure loving to be recognized often explained that the unique human situation in the universe is epitomized by the word recognition (maʿrifa). When Adam was taught all the names, he gained the ability to recognize God per se, that is, the entirety of God’s reality in the fullness of its creative manifestation, not simply in the traces and properties of a few attributes. Only human beings can recognize God in himself, and this means that only they can love him for himself, since no one can love what he does not know. An important corollary here is that those who love God for what they can get from him (e.g., prosperity in this world, paradise in the next) do not in fact love him himself. Rather, they love certain reflections of his reality, and this self-centered love will hold them back from the fullness of perfection.

In short, God created human beings because he loves them. In contrast to most of us, he had no ulterior motive in his love, for he has nothing to gain from us. He made us beautiful, and he loves our beauty. He created us in his own form, and hence we are not only beautiful, we are also inveterate lovers of beauty. This brings us to the third theme of love in terms of the creative command: “They love.” This means that we were created to be lovers—we cannot avoid loving. At the same time, “There is no lover but God,” so the root and source of human love is God’s love. Rūmī among others often talks about human love as a reflection of God’s love. In one of his prose works he puts these words into the Creator’s mouth:

“What place is man's farm plot—within which grows the crop of flesh and skin and bones—for these aspirations and desires? These desires are My pure attributes. . . . ‘I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized.’”¹³

One of the terms commonly used as a designation for innate human love is poverty (*faqr*), which is also a typical name for Sufism itself (more so than the word Sufism before modern times). The word’s meaning has always been understood in terms of the Qur’anic verse, “O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Rich, the Praiseworthy” (35:15). In other words, human beings are empty of reality and beg to be filled. They are needy, desirous, hungry, and thirsty by nature. In the last analysis, these attributes manifest their innate love for God. When the early Sufis called themselves the poor, this was not because they saw themselves as different from anyone else. Rather, they wanted to remind themselves who they were in fact.

One of al-Ghazālī’s younger contemporaries, Aḥmad Sam‘ānī (d. 1140), wrote an extensive Persian commentary on the most beautiful names of God, highlighting the manner in which all God’s names and attributes show forth his loving nature. The book is one of the longest, most profound, and most eloquent expositions of love in Islamic literature, and its prose is infused with the sorts of imagery and symbolism that were to become the stock in trade of poets in later generations, like ‘Aṭṭār, Rūmī, Sa‘dī, and Ḥāfiẓ. In one of his many discussions of poverty, Sam‘ānī points to the ontological roots of human love, the fact that we cannot not love:

The treasury of bestowers gains luster from the requests and neediness of requesters. No requester had greater need than dust. Heaven and earth, the Throne and the Footstool, were given to dust, but its need did not decrease by one iota. The eight paradises were given over exclusively to its work, but need seized its reins, for poverty was the host at the table of its existence: “Surely man was created grasping” [70:19].

A grasping person is someone who never becomes full. God brought Adam into paradise and permitted him its bliss, but He said, “Don’t go after that tree.”

Nonetheless, despite all the blissful things, Adam was seized by the tree. “The forbidden is enticing.” Yes, He forbade it to him, but He did not purify his inwardness of wanting it. Indeed, every serving boy in the world is a serving boy of his own want....

The avarice of the Adamites goes back to the days of Adam himself. Whoever is not avaricious is not an Adamite. As much as someone eats, he needs more. If he eats something and says, “I’m full,” he’s lying. There is still more room, for the Adamite is never full.¹⁴

Finally the verse of mutual love says that human beings love “Him.” Read in terms of the creative command, this means that people love God by nature. They cannot not love God because, in the last analysis, all others are simply God’s signs, that is, manifestations of his beauty, or traces and properties of his names and attributes. Rūmī, who makes this point repeatedly in his poetry, puts it this way in prose:

All the hopes, desires, loves, and affections that people have for different things—father, mother, friends, heavens, earth, gardens, palaces, knowledge, activity, food, drink—all these are desires for God, and these things are veils.¹⁵

If people do not recognize that there is no beloved but God and fail to acknowledge that they are compulsory servants of the All-Merciful, this is because, as the Qur’an puts it, “Adam forgot” (20:115). People have inherited their father’s forgetfulness, which explains why God has sent so many prophets. This brings us to the role of the religious command, which is to help people overcome forgetfulness.

Love in the Religious Command

From the standpoint of the creative command, to say “God loves” means that God loves by definition and that His loving nature entails love for creation. From the standpoint of the religious command, to say “God loves” means that the same divine energy motivates him to remind people of their own nature by sending prophetic guidance. Or, in terms of the divine names, it means that God is the Guide, and there is no guide but he. The result is that those addressed by guidance have the option of voluntary servanthood, over and above the fact of compulsory servanthood.

Just as God’s creative love is closely associated with the all-comprehensive divine mercy, so also his guiding love is tightly bound up with a specific mercy directed at those who freely accept his guidance. According to many theologians, God is called “All-Merciful” (*rahmān*) because of his creative love and “Ever-Merciful” (*rahīm*) because of his guiding love. As the All-Merciful he loves everyone and everything without exception. As the Ever-Merciful he loves those who follow his guidance. The Qur’an differentiates between these two sorts of mercy in the verse, “My mercy embraces everything, but I shall prescribe it for those who are

godfearing and who pay the alms, and those who indeed have faith in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger" (7:156). The mercy of the All-Merciful embraces all things, which is to say that everyone will receive it forever, for it is the share of compulsory servants. The mercy of the Ever-Merciful is written out for those who follow prophetic guidance, so it is the additional share of voluntary servants.¹⁶

The verse of mutual love says that God loves "them." In light of the creative command, this means that God's love is focused on human beings, because they were created in the unified form of the most beautiful divine names. In light of the religious command, it means that he teaches people how to live up to their beauty, much as parents offer guidance to their children. In terms of the creative command, God loves human beings unconditionally. In terms of the religious command, he also loves them conditionally, just as their reception of the mercy of the Ever-Merciful depends on certain conditions. In other words, God will love them if they obey the religious command and cultivate the beauty of their own souls. The Qur'an refers to love's conditionality in the following verse, which is quoted in the literature only slightly less often than the verse of mutual love: "Say [O Muhammad!], 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you'" (3:31).

This specific verse provides the basic rationale for Islamic praxis, which is to follow the religious command as taught by the Qur'an and as embodied in the deeds and character traits of the Prophet. As the Qur'an says, "You have a beautiful example in God's Messenger" (33:21). This is sufficient proof that God loves him, for "God loves the beautiful." He should be followed because he is God's beloved, and if people do indeed follow him, they will be worthy of God's conditional love: "Follow me; God will love you."

The Qur'an explains the conditions of love in many verses. For example, it says that God loves those who do what is beautiful (2:195), who repent (2:222), who have trust (3:159), who are just (49:9), and so on. It also says that God does not love the wrongdoers (3:140), the workers of corruption (5:64), the transgressors (5:87), the immoderate (7:31), the treacherous (8:58), the proud (16:23), the boastful (31:18). All of these verses refer to the soul's inner beauty or lack thereof, not simply to outward comportment.

Al-Ghazālī and many others call the achievement of inner beauty "characterization by the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). Having been given a certain free will, people have the ability to strive against ugliness of character, which is rooted in the forgetfulness inherited from their father Adam. By coming out from the veils of forgetfulness and ignorance, they can actualize the beautiful character traits latent in their souls, created in the form of God. Moreover, it is precisely this beauty of soul that calls down God's love. Thus, in a sound hadith, the Prophet quotes God as saying that, when his servant approaches him through performing good works (that is, by following the religious command), God will love

him. Then, “When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he holds, and the foot with which he walks.” This is precisely being characterized by God’s character traits. It also points to the final goal of lovers, union with the Beloved.

The texts often make clear that no one enters union by moving from here to there. Union entails waking up to the actual situation, for, as the Qur’an puts it, “He is with you wherever you are” (57:4). Unless people walk in the footsteps of the prophets and reach the point where God loves them, they will not become aware of the manner in which God is with them right now, in the very act of issuing the creative command. Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240), the greatest mystical theologian of Islamic history, explains this point while commenting on the fact that in the hadith of nearness, God says “I am his hearing,” not “I become his hearing”:

God's words "I am" show that this was already the situation, but the servant was not aware. Hence the generous gift that this nearness gives him is the unveiling and knowledge that God is his hearing and eyesight. He had been imagining that he hears through his own hearing, but he was hearing through his Lord. In the same way, during his life, man supposes because of his ignorance that he hears through his own spirit, but in actual fact he hears only through his Lord.¹⁷

In sum, God loves those who become characterized by beautiful character traits, and these traits are nothing but his own attributes. God himself is love, and, as the inscription on his Throne reads, “My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.” Given the prominence of mercy as a divine character trait, it follows that the predominant traits of God’s beloved servants are love for God and mercy and compassion toward all of creation. This is why God addresses Muhammad, the supreme guide in the path of love, with the words, “We sent thee only as a mercy to the worlds” (21:107). From this standpoint, real love for one’s neighbor is predicated upon real love for God. Encouraging people to be kind and compassionate when they do not love God is to encourage the impossible.

Third, the verse of mutual love says “they love.” In terms of the creative command, this means that love is woven into human nature and cannot be avoided. In terms of the religious command, it means that becoming fully aware of one’s loving nature depends on putting the religious command into practice. A good deal of Sufi literature describes the ascending stages of loving God. For example, Anṣārī, author of the already mentioned Way Stations of the Travelers, wrote a similar work in Persian called One Hundred Fields (Sad maydān). Both books enumerate one hundred stages on the path to God, though the details are not the same. Like authors of similar books, Anṣārī designates the stages with the names of specific traits of character and qualities of soul drawn from the Qur’an and the Hadith, such as repentance, desire, patience, struggle, wakefulness, remembrance, forbearance, certainty,

sincerity, and so on. In the introduction to the Persian book, he explains that it began as lectures delivered during the holy month of Muharram in the year 1056. He was explaining to the listeners the significance of the verse of following, that is, “Say: ‘If you love God, follow me; God will love you.’” At the very end of the book he reminds his readers that he has been discussing the stages of love: “These one hundred fields are all drowned in the field of love.”¹⁸

Finally, in light of the creative command, to say that people love “Him” means that God is the only object of human love, since there is none beautiful but God and none beloved but God. In light of the religious command, it means that people are called upon to recognize who it is that they love. This is why Rūmī frequently distinguishes between true and metaphorical love. True love recognizes God as its object, and metaphorical love gets trapped in appearances. These lines are typical:

What you love is not the form,
 whether love is of this world or the next.
 When you fall in love with the form of something,
 why do you stop loving it when its spirit leaves?
 Its form is still there—why have you had your fill?
 O lover, look again! Who is your beloved?...
 A ray of the sun fell on the wall,
 the wall gained a borrowed shine.
 Why attach your heart to a wall, simple man?
 Search out the root that shines without cease.¹⁹

Once people recognize the object of their love, they may still respond with a common question: “Falling in love is not under my control. How then can I feel this love that I have understood in theory?” The answer is that people must act out their ontological love for God, and the “feeling” will come when it comes. Failure to practice what love demands simply shows that one’s theoretical understanding is no more than skin deep. Here it is helpful to recall a parallel Qur’anic discussion about the conditionality of divine response. In this case the verses are talking about dhikr, an important Qur’anic term that means reminder, remembrance, and mention. God remembers us ontologically by creating us. He reminds us religiously by sending prophets. We respond to the prophetic messages by remembering him and mentioning his revealed names.

The Prophet made an explicit connection between love and remembrance in his words, “When someone loves something, he remembers it much.” What he is saying is in fact self-evident—at least to anyone who has been in love—and it helps explain the rationale for the quintessential practice of Sufism, which is remembrance of God. As a practice, remembrance (sometimes translated as invocation) involves methodical mention of one or more of God’s

revealed names, whether aloud, silently, or deep in the heart. When we know that we love God, even if we do not “feel” the love, we should remember him much. The very act of remembering the beloved brings love from virtuality to actuality. Just as God has a conditional love for us that depends upon our following the Prophet, so also he has a conditional remembrance of us that depends upon our remembering him. Talking of the conditionality of love the Qur’an says, “Follow me; God will love you.” Talking of conditionality of remembrance it says, “Remember Me; I will remember you” (2:152). The Qur’an also mentions the latter’s conditionality in verses like, “They forgot God, so God forgot them” (9:67). “Be not as those who forgot God, and so He caused them to forget themselves” (59:19).

In this regard Rūmī provides a useful instruction to seekers in a story about a man who busied himself with remembering God, no doubt because he had heard another of the Qur’anic verses referring to the conditionality of love: “Call upon Me; I will respond to you” (40:60). One night Satan entered his dreams and whispered to him that he was wasting his time, since God obviously had no use for the likes of him. Where was the “Here I am?” that is God’s response to those who call upon him. The man despaired of his practice and ceased mentioning the name of God. Then a saint appeared to him in a dream and said that he had come with a message from God:

“Your saying ‘God’ is My ‘Here I am.’
 Your need, pain, and burning is My messenger.
 Your seeking stratagems and remedies
 is My attraction and the loosening of your feet.
 Your fear and love is the noose of My gentleness;
 beneath every ‘O Lord!’ of yours is many a ‘Here I am.’”²⁰

The Book of Love

In sum, we have ten basic themes in talk of love. The first is that love is unity, the Alpha, and the tenth that it is union, the Omega. Between the first and the last stages are eight standpoints throwing light on the complexities of the human situation.

Let me finish by citing another passage from Maybudī, a master of exegesis, jurisprudence, dialectical theology, and Sufism. In his commentary on the Qur’an, he divides each group of verses into three sections—literal translation, exegetical lore, and allusions. In the third section he singles out a few verses and explains their implications in terms of achieving the soul’s transformation. Like Shams-i Tabrīzī, who flourished a hundred years later, Maybudī saw the Qur’an as a book of love. He makes this especially explicit while explaining the verse, “When there came to them a book from God” (2:89):

A book came to them—and what a book! For it was the Lord’s reminder to His lovers. It was a book whose title was “The Eternal Love,” a book whose purport is the story of love and lovers. It was a book that provides security from being cut off, the remedy for unsettled breasts, health for ailing hearts, and ease for grieving spirits—a mercy from God to the folk of the world.²¹

¹ I have tried to come up with an adequate description of Sufism’s role in the Islamic tradition (and to explain why “mysticism” is an inappropriate designation) in Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000). Carl Ernst has highlighted some of the problems connected with using the word Sufism itself in The Shambhala Guide to Sufism (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

² Chittick, Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 156.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁴ Scholars employed various terms for the two commands. This specific pairing, al-amr al-kawnī and al-amr al-dīnī, is taken from The Garden of the Lovers (Rawdat al-muhibbīn) by the well-known dialectical theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350).

⁵ Given the broad range covered by the word love, there are also several other important Qur’anic words that can be taken as differentiating its various sorts. The Jordanian scholar Qazi bin Muhammad analyzes a total of thirty-eight words in Love in the Holy Quran (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2011).

⁶ Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr, edited by Badī‘ al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1957-67), verse 18197.

⁷ Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddat al-abrār, edited by ‘Alī Aṣghar Ḥikmat (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1952-60), vol. 6, p. 409.

⁸ Abu’l-Ḥasan al-Daylamī, Kitāb ‘aṭf al-alif al-ma’lūf ‘ala’l-lām al-ma‘tūf, edited by J. C. Vadet (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1962), pp. 36-37. For an English translation see Joseph Norment Bell and Hasan Mahmood Abdul Latif Al Shafie, A Treatise on Mystical Love (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Their translation of this passage is found on p. 59.

⁹ Rūmī, Majālis-i sab‘a, edited by Tawfīq Subḥānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kayhān, 2000), pp. 121-22.

¹⁰ All those familiar with the Qur’an—not least the countless authors who discussed this verse in this form—know that it is a clause taken from a longer sentence. In translating the whole verse, the clause needs to be rendered differently for reasons of English grammar: “O you who have faith, if any of you turn back on your religion, God will bring a people whom He loves and who love Him.”

¹¹ al-Ghazālī, Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1993), vol. 4, p. 474. For a translation al-Ghazālī’s chapter on love, see Eric Ormsby, Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment. Book XXXVI of The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Cambridge, MA: The Islamic Texts Society, 2011). His slightly different translation of this passage is found on pp. 101-2.

¹² Quoted by Maybudī, Kashf al-asrār, vol. 5, p. 232. Cited in Chittick, Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 33.

¹³ Rūmī, Majālis-i sabʿa, pp. 118-19.

¹⁴ Aḥmad Samʿānī, Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmāʾ al-malik al-fattāḥ, edited by Najīb Māyil Hirawī (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i ʿilmī wa Farhangī, 1989), pp. 155-56; translation taken from Chittick, Divine Love, p. 387.

¹⁵ Rūmī, Fīhi mā fīhi, edited by Badīʿ al-Zamān Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), p. 35. Translation from Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 201.

¹⁶ On the two mercies, see Chittick, Divine Love, pp. 23-32.

¹⁷ Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya (Cairo, 1911), volume 3, p. 68, line 2. For the passage in context, see Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 326.

¹⁸ Cited in Chittick, Divine Love, p. 293.

¹⁹ Rūmī, The Mathnawī, edited by R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925-40), Book 2, verses 703-5, 708-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Book 3, verses 195-97.

²¹ Maybudī, Kashf al-asrār, vol. 1, pp. 278-79; Chittick, Divine Love, p. 41.