

Friendship and Love in Islamic Spirituality

William C. Chittick

I would have been happy to talk about “friendship” without mentioning “love” if I could have done so. But differentiating between these two concepts is not easy in Arabic and Persian, the two great languages of classical Islamic civilization.¹

Those who know Persian might reply that *dūst* means “friend” and *dūstī* means “friendship,” and that friendship is different from love, which is *mahabbat* or *ishq*. This ignores the fact that to say “I love you” in Persian you say *dūstat dāram*, literally, “I have you as a friend.” Moreover, this is not a new usage—it goes back to the beginnings of the modern Persian language. Maybudī for example, who completed a grand Persian commentary on the Koran in the year 1126, consistently translates the Arabic verb “to love” (*hubb*) with this very expression: “to have as a friend.” In other words, in Persian, nine hundred years ago just as today, in order to say “I love you” you had to say *dūstat dāram*, “I have you as a friend.”

Something similar is true for Arabic. The generic word for love in Arabic is *hubb* (or *mahabba*). It means not only love in our meanings of the word but also friendship. It is true that Arabic and Persian have dozens of other words that are used to indicate various sorts of love and friendship, but in the two languages, the most inclusive and commonly used words designate both.

Schools of Islamic Thought

Whatever word we use to talk about friendship and love, we are discussing qualities of the human soul. By this I mean that love pertains essentially to our inner lives, the realm of life and consciousness known as the self. No matter how many outward signs of love and friendship there may be, they cannot be defined in terms of behavior and activity. Once it is accepted that love and friendship pertain primarily to the life of the soul, it should be obvious that some of the more prominent schools of Islamic thought have little or nothing to say about them.

Probably the best known form of Islamic learning nowadays—at least the most newsworthy—is jurisprudence, the science of the Shariah. The Shariah is the ritual and social law derived from the Koran and the example of the Prophet. The jurists, who are the experts in the Shariah, have nothing to say in their capacity as jurists about love and friendship, for the simple reason that these cannot be legislated. There is no possible way to enforce the edicts, “Love God” and “Love your neighbor.”

A second major school of thought in classical Islamic civilization was Kalam or dogmatic theology. Kalam was closely allied with jurisprudence and talked about God as an omnipotent and somewhat tyrannical supreme legislator. Kalam could not ignore the many mentions of love in the Koran and the sayings of the Prophet, so it defined love in terms of lawful activity. Basically, the Kalam experts held that it is absurd to suggest that frail, imperfect, ignorant creatures—that is, human beings—can love the transcendent God. And it is equally absurd to suggest that the omnipotent God can relate to us in any

way other than telling us what to do. In short, according to Kalam, God's love for us is that he provides us with commandments, and our love for God is that we obey.

The Kalam interpretation of love does violence to the meaning of the word, so it was often criticized by other scholars. In any case, by the time of al-Ghazālī in the eleventh century, the Kalam experts were modifying this view of love in order to bring it more in line with the actual experience of love as a transforming presence in the soul.ⁱⁱ

Two other major streams of Islamic learning—streams that developed at the same time as jurisprudence and Kalam—paid a great deal of attention to love and friendship. One was philosophy, whose experts followed in the footsteps of Aristotle and Plotinus. They developed a sophisticated science of ethics and gave friendship a prominent role, not least because it was one of Aristotle's favorite virtues. One should keep in mind, however, that philosophy, then as now, was an elite enterprise. Very few people actually studied the details of philosophy or had any real idea of what the philosophers were talking about; the same, by the way, was true of dogmatic theology.

The second stream of Islamic learning that stressed the importance of love and friendship is commonly called "Sufism." Sufism was, and still is, an approach to Islamic learning that focuses on moral and spiritual perfection. Its goal is to achieve a profound transformation in the very substance of the human soul, changing the way we see ourselves and the world.

In contrast to both philosophy and dogmatic theology, Sufism was readily accessible to all Muslims. The Sufi teachers wrote extensively and clearly, they founded schools and centers of learning, and they preached in the mosques. Moreover, the greatest poets of Islamic civilization were often Sufi teachers. The tremendous popularity of their poetry derived largely from the fact that they sang about love—an object of perennial human fascination. The most famous of these poets in the West, Rumi, was a superb story-teller and one of Islam's great spiritual teachers. Rumi's radiance—like that of several other Sufi poets—extended throughout the Persianate world, which meant from the Balkans through Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Among Arabic speakers, the Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Fārid, who died when Rumi was a youth, played a similar role in highlighting love as the key to all human and divine relationships.

The One Reality

If we want to grasp the role of love and friendship in Islamic spirituality, we need to begin where the Sufi teachers typically began, that is, with God. Before I go down this route, however, let me remind you that Islamic teachings are built on the Koran, which is understood as God's personal expression of his own reality. The Koran explains why God created human beings and what they should do about it. If I keep on mentioning the Koran, it is because it is the one anchor of all Islamic thought.

Both the Koran and Islamic spirituality in general take God for granted and call everything else into question. The only certainty is that God is real. The human realm is one of ambiguity and fog. We can never know what's what, except in one respect: The true reality is always present. In contrast, we ourselves are sometimes present and mostly absent. Our existence is something new, and on any cosmic scale, it lasts but a moment. Permanence is God's attribute, not ours. Knowledge belongs to God, not us. Whatever we do possess belongs to us for the time being, not essentially.

These points can be put into the language of traditional Islamic thought by saying that the truth from which all truth derives is that the ultimate reality is the only true reality. More simply: There is no true reality but God. This notion is expressed most succinctly in the four Arabic words that are the primary teaching of the Koran: “(There is) no god but God.” Everything other than God, including us, is not truly real. We are partly real and mostly unreal. The big question is, “In what respect are we real, and in what respect are we unreal?” Once the issue is posed in these terms, it becomes clear that human life should aim at searching for true reality and abandoning false reality.

This leads me to my basic point: With one voice, the spiritual tradition says that this process of reaching out for reality is called “love.” In order to understand why this name is appropriate, we need to look at four basic issues: love as the divine reality, love as the human image of the divine reality, the consummation of love, and the path that leads to consummation.

Love as the Divine Reality

In many verses the Koran says that God loves certain people, and it also says that people love God and that they love other things as well. The Koran makes clear that between God and human beings love is mutual. The most commonly cited Koranic verse in discussions of love makes precisely this point: “He loves them, and they love Him” (5:54).

If God is the only true reality and if everything other than God is a foggy, ambiguous mixture of reality and unreality, then God’s attributes are true and real, and the same attributes ascribed to anything else are ambiguous and tentative. This means that when it is said that people love, their love is tremendously watered down compared to God’s love, and it is also easily distracted and misdirected. The Koran often alludes to the fact that everything that people love other than God is bound to disappoint them.

The reality of God’s love as contrasted with the unreality of human love is typically explained in terms of the formula of divine unity—“No god but God.” God loves people, so he is a lover and his love is true and real, but not the love of anything else. It follows that “There is no true lover but God.” We know that God is the object of love, so “There is no true beloved but God.” In short, this is the basic position of the Koran and Islamic spirituality concerning God and love: In reality and in the final analysis, God alone is lover, God alone is beloved, and God alone is love.

Moreover, love is God’s eternal nature, because he does not change. This means that God is lover and beloved outside of time and whether or not there happens to be a universe. In his unity, God loves himself, because there is nothing else to love. The Prophet alluded to God’s self-love in a famous saying: “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” God’s beauty is eternal, so God loves himself eternally.

If all this sounds rather “self-centered”—well, yes, that is exactly the point. There is only one true reality, one true self (as the Upanishads like to remind us). In the Koran, when God speaks to Moses from the Burning Bush, he says, “There is no god but I.” In other words, there is no true “I” but the divine I, there is no true self but the divine Self.

Love as the Divine Image

Once we understand that God is love and that he loves himself, we need to ask how his love impinges on us. Why is it that the Koran says that God loves human

beings? The basic answer is that in loving his own beauty, God also loves every possible beauty, because all possible beauty is simply a reverberation or an echo of his infinite beauty. This means that by loving himself, God also loves the non-eternal beauties that arise as a result of his infinite creativity. These non-eternal beauties are everything other than God, the entire universe in all its temporal and spatial expanse. As the Koran puts it, “He made everything that He created beautiful” (32:7). Since he loves beauty and since everything he created is beautiful, he loves everything.

But all beauty is not created equal. The most beautiful of created things is that which displays God’s beauty to the fullest possible degree. In several verses, the Koran calls God’s attributes “the most beautiful names.” In an echo of the Hebrew Bible, the Prophet said that God created Adam in His own form. The Koran itself says, “We created the human being in the most beautiful stature” (95:4). The most beautiful stature can only be that which reflects all the most beautiful names of God. Hence the most beautiful of all created things is the human being, made in God’s form. This helps explain why the Koran never says explicitly that God loves anything other than human beings.

The basic teaching of the Koran about human beings can be summed up in two verses. The first is, “He loves them” (5:54), that is, human beings. The second is, “He taught Adam the names, all of them” (2:31). God loves human beings because they are the most beautiful of all created things. When he created them in his own beautiful form, he bestowed upon them the understanding of all the names, including his own most beautiful names. What distinguishes human beings from other created things is not just their perfect beauty, but also the fact that they were given the ability to recognize the names and realities of things and thus to recognize beauty wherever they see it.

Just as God loves beauty, so also do those created in his form. Human beings love beauty as soon as they recognize it. They were taught all the names, so they have the capacity to recognize the beauty of everything, since every name designates some beautiful creation. They also have the capacity to recognize all of God’s most beautiful names and to love God in terms of each name as well as in terms of the totality of the names—that is, inasmuch as all the names together designate God in himself.

So, God loves human beings, he created them in his own form, and he taught them all the names. Here, however, the Koran inserts a caveat: Generally, people do not recover their innate knowledge of all the names, nor do they act in conformity with the beauty of God’s names and the beauty of their own form. They were created with a beautiful stature, but they do not live up to it. To the degree that they do *not* live up to it, they are ugly, and God does not love the ugly.

Here, of course, an interesting question arises: “If God loves everything, why does he not love the ugly?” There are many answers to this question. One way to deal with it is to say that ugliness is not really something, but rather the lack of beauty. Another way is to distinguish between two basic kinds of love. The first kind is also called *rahma*, which is typically translated as mercy or compassion. This word is an abstract noun derived from the concrete noun *rahim*, which means “womb.” On the human level, the most obvious example of merciful love is that of mothers, a point that the Prophet made in several sayings. And mothers, of course, want their children to act beautifully and to avoid ugliness. They praise children for being good and blame them

for being bad, without ever ceasing to love them. The second kind of divine love responds to human beauty or the lack of it, a point I will come back to shortly.

First, however, it is important to understand what is meant by human beauty and ugliness. These are not physical characteristics, but moral and spiritual characteristics, which is to say that they pertain to the inner qualities of the soul. The Koran cites some of these qualities in verses that mention various people whom God loves, such as those who have faith, those who act with benevolence, those who trust in God, those who act with justice. The book also mentions various ugly qualities and says explicitly that God does *not* love them, such as wrongdoing, transgression, pride, and boastfulness.

In this view of human nature, God created human beings in the most beautiful form, but he put them into a situation where their form became obscured. In order for the innate beauty of people's divine forms to appear fully, they need to employ their free will to the best effect. To the extent that the beauty does appear, then God will love them—an additional love, over and above the original creative love.

Once it is understood that people need to do something in order to become beautiful, the question arises as to what exactly they must do. In the Koranic view, people have forgotten their own beautiful form and the love that goes along with it. In response to their forgetfulness, God sent the prophets, who are traditionally numbered 124,000. All prophets have the same mission: to remind people of what they have forgotten and to teach them how to love God and to recover their own innate beauty.

Definitions of Love

Notice that I have not tried to define love. Most Islamic texts on love insist that it cannot be defined. As for beauty, it is usually explained as “that which attracts love,” so it also remains undefined.

Any attempt to explain love falls flat on its face. Anyone who has ever been “in love” can appreciate this. Something essential about love is inexplicable. Instead of trying to define it, Sufis, philosophers, and other scholars describe the qualities that are found in lovers. Some of them call these qualities “symptoms,” comparing love to a disease. When Rumi says that you must be a lover to understand love, he is reminding us that love is inexplicable. When he says that he can talk about love until the Day of Resurrection, he means that he can talk forever about its signs and symptoms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Generally, those who talk about love agree that its most basic attribute is the desire to achieve nearness. Lovers want to be together, not apart. Nearness to what you love is happiness, distance from what you love is misery.

The goal of love, in one word, is “union,” which means coming together and becoming one. On the physical level, “union” can mean the sexual act. Most people know, however, that referring to sex as “love” is at best a metaphor. Real love involves a good deal more than physical coupling.

The Koran teaches that the goal of human life is to gain nearness to God. People are separate from God because he is one thing and they are something else. He is the creator, they are creatures. Nonetheless, God created human beings out of love for them. Creation means to bestow existence. God already knew he loved people before he created them, which is to say he loved them in eternity. But that was one-sided love, because people were not there as conscious and aware individuals. God created them so that they could share in the joy of love. But “love,” as I said, is the desire for

togetherness and union. So, by giving human beings existence in his own form, God gave them the desire for togetherness, union, and unity.

Notice that togetherness with God is the original state of human beings before they existed. In the realm of pre-existence, people were potentialities, not actualities. Once they came into existence, they began to sense the separation that permeates their existence, so they began to desire togetherness. Separation plays an important role in all discussions of love. Without it, there can be no desire for togetherness. The very first line of Rumi's epic story of love and lovers, the *Mathnawī* (in 25,000 couplets), begins like this:

Listen to this flute as it complains,
telling the tale of separation.

Love is the story of separation and the quest for union. Having come into existence as individual beings, people are now aware that they exist apart from others and that they desire to come together, which is to say that they love. They know that they do not have what they want and they are driven to reach for it.

But, what exactly do they want? This takes us back to the formula of unity: "There is no true beloved but the divine beloved." People think they want this or that. In fact, when they love things, they are loving God's attributes, such as beauty, generosity, and kindness. What makes human love problematic is that people find these attributes in things that are ephemeral. Rumi likes to say that the beauty that we perceive and love in things and people is gold-plating. The only thing that can satisfy the human craving for beauty is the very source of gold itself. This is why Rumi writes in a typical passage,

All the hopes, desires, loves, and affections that people have for different things—fathers, mothers, friends, heaven, earth, gardens, palaces, knowledge, activity, food, drink—all of these are desires for God, and these things are veils.^{iv}

The reason that everything we love is a veil is simply that all things are creatures, not the Creator. Created things conceal the Creator, but they also reveal God's most beautiful names and attributes, so they perform a valuable and necessary role in the process of love. Rumi says, for example, that God gives us our disparate loves and desires for the same reason that a soldier gives a wooden sword to his child. People must learn how to love, but ultimately that means that they must learn what it is that they truly love. The sooner they learn the difference between gold-plating and gold itself, the sooner they can dispense with wooden swords. Rumi writes,

In man there is a love, a pain, an itch, and an urgency such that, if a hundred thousand worlds were to become his property, he would gain no rest or ease. These people occupy themselves totally with every kind of craft, industry, and status; they learn astronomy, medicine, and other things, but they find no ease, for their goal has not been attained. . . . All these pleasures and goals are like a ladder. The rungs of a ladder are no place to take up residence and stay—they're for passing on. Happy is he who wakes up quickly and becomes aware! Then the long road becomes short, and he does not waste his life on the ladder's rungs.^v

The Consummation of Love

The goal of love and friendship is for the two lovers or the two friends to come together, not to stay apart. It should be fairly obvious that this togetherness, even in

personal relationships, is not physical. Rather, it is an invisible harmony and conformity of nature. It is an inexplicable quality that attracts two people and can be strengthened and nurtured by appropriate activity, though there are no guarantees that it will last.

When you want to achieve togetherness with someone, one of the standard tactics is to do things the way she or he likes them done. You give of yourself for the sake of your friend or lover, not for your own sake. If you act for your own benefit, that is not love for the other, it is love for yourself. If you love someone in order to gain status or wealth or some other desirable quality, then you are the quality, not the person.

In God's case also, when you want to be God's friend or lover, you do what you can to establish harmony. You do things the way your beloved wants them done. Serving God with your own benefit in view does not deserve the name love. The desire for togetherness demands surrender of self, because selfhood is the cause of duality and separation. The more complete the surrender, the more complete the consummation.

In the case of the divine beloved, togetherness was the original state before we came into existence, and it is also the final goal of love. There is a major difference, however, between the beginning and the end. Before we became separate, we did not know that we were together. The final consummation demands full awareness of the reality of separation. Only then can we understand and appreciate the meaning of togetherness.

In the Islamic context, it is clear that God, as the only true lover, is pure of any ulterior motive. In other words, God is infinitely rich and gains nothing for himself by loving others and bringing them into existence. Others receive the overflow of God's infinite being. They gain from him, not he from them. His love is a free gift, no strings attached.

Putting aside all the details of how God relates to human beings, it is not too difficult to see that the basic point in discussions of divine and human love, in Islamic spirituality at least, is that God's love for human beings is so unconditional that the gift he bestows upon them is himself. He created us in his own form, and that form embraces all of his most beautiful names. We already possess the divine beauty within ourselves. Our craving to return to our original unity is simultaneously a craving to return to our true selves. Our true selves are the unique divine forms that each of us represents. From one point of view, the goal of love is to achieve togetherness with God. From another point of view, the goal is to overcome the fragmentation of the self—the pain, suffering, disorder, disarray, and disharmony that typify our daily existence.

Ethical Transformation in Love

Many Sufis and later theologians (like al-Ghazālī) call this dual process of becoming one with God and integrated with one's true self *takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*, "becoming characterized by the character traits of God."

God loves beauty, but he does not love ugliness, a specifically human quality arising from the forgetfulness and self-centeredness of the human soul. If we are to be the objects of God love, we need to discard the ugly character traits that conceal the soul's innate beauty. The beautiful character traits are designated by the divine names—compassion, justice, generosity, forgiveness, and so on. The sum total of these traits is precisely the form of God. To actualize this form is to achieve togetherness with one's

true self, and this is simultaneously to achieve togetherness with the beautiful attributes of God.

Notice that this discussion of human perfection as the actualization of the divine character traits is one of the points on which Islamic spirituality intersects with philosophy. The philosophers discuss friendship in addressing the perfection of the practical intellect (*`aql `amali*), which they contrast with the theoretical intellect (*`aql nazari*). The practical intellect applies the theoretical vision to the realm of activity, and the principles of its practical vision they discuss as “ethics.” The Arabic word for ethics is *akhlāq*, that is, “character traits,” exactly the same word used by Sufis and theologians. So, in the philosophical discussion, friendship/love is one of the ethical traits innate to the soul. It demands various ways of proper interaction with others, but it can only be fully actualized when the soul achieves the intellectual perfection that is the goal of philosophical training. One of the words the philosophers used to designate the achievement of this goal is *ta'alluh* (from the same root as Allah). This word means deiformity, that is, actualizing as one's own the form of God. In other words, *ta'alluh* is a synonym for *takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*, becoming characterized by God's character traits.

In short, the “friendship” that Muslim philosophers considered one of the highest virtues of the human soul is precisely the same divine attribute as that the Sufis discussed as the highest calling of the soul. This does not mean that Sufis paid less attention to explaining how this virtue needs to be extended to all people. Rather, the philosophers (especially in the early period) were disinclined to talk about the virtues with explicit reference to the Koran and the Hadith, where God is always at the center of the discussion. Instead of talking about “God,” they much preferred words like “Necessary Being” or “First Reality,” and by and large they avoided theological and juridical terminology.

The Path of Love

In this picture of the human situation, when people come to understand that the real object of their love is God, they need to strive to become characterized by God's beautiful character traits. In order to do this, they need to follow prophetic guidance, because the prophets teach how to love. For those whom the Koran is addressing, this means following the prophet Muhammad, whom the Koran calls “a beautiful example” (33:21). That his example is beautiful is enough to indicate that God loves him. Those who follow his example can also be loved by God.

Spiritual teachers have always taught that Muhammad's beautiful example lies primarily in the inner qualities of his soul, which are precisely the divine character traits. Imitating these qualities demands much more than simply obeying the rules and following the Shariah. It means overcoming the everyday forgetfulness of the soul and transforming its consciousness and awareness through characterization by the divine character traits.

The Koran makes clear that people should follow Muhammad's example to polish and hone their love for God. Anyone can say, “I love God,” but these are empty words until they are put into practice. The Koran explains the basic principle here in a verse addressed to Muhammad: “Say [to the people]: ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you’” (3:31). In other words, no matter how much you may think you love

God, God will not love you in return until you change ourselves, until you become worthy of God's love. The way to become worthy is to follow prophetic guidance.

The goal of following the guidance is explained by a famous saying of the Prophet in which he quotes the words of God: "When My servant approaches Me through good works, then I love him. When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyes with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks." In other words, the practice of love on the human side attracts God's reciprocating love and results in union, which is the goal of love.

Notice that God's creative love is entirely outside of our hands. In contrast, his responsive love demands human effort for it to be achieved. Nonetheless, most authors also add that the effort itself is a result of God's grace, love, and mercy, because people do not have the power to lift themselves up on their own. In any case, the basic point here is that the initial, creative love gave us existence, but in order to benefit fully from love, we need to do something about it.

Summary

By way of review, let me sum up my points like this: In the context of the Koran and Islamic spirituality generally, love and friendship are a single reality. In the last analysis, that reality is nothing other than God himself. God created the universe out of love, and he created human beings in his own image, so love pertains to their very selves. Human beings love by nature, and they have the potential to love God for himself, not simply for his bounties and blessings.

The reality of love permeates existence and drives people to search and seek. For the most part, people have forgotten what it is that they truly love, so they are constantly disappointed in their love. The cause of human confusion is that the single reality of love has become fragmented, and this prevents them from seeing that the whole universe is playing out the game of love. In trying to help people see through their muddle, God sends prophets, whose job is to teach people how to love. Only when they learn to love by following the prophetic example can they truly love God, and as a function of love for God, love their neighbors as well.

ⁱ On love in Islamic thought generally, see Chittick, “Divine and Human Love in Islam” (*Divine Love: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions*, edited by Jeff Levin and Stephen G. Post), West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2010, pp. 163-200. I am limiting this talk to the generic words for love/friendship, Persian *dūstī* and Arabic *hubb* (which is usually a synonym for *ishq*, though the latter often connotes passionate love). Several other words might be brought into the discussion, each of which would add nuances and shades of meaning. For example, one of the standard ways of translating the Koranic word *walī* is “friend.” God is the “friend” of the believers, and they, or least some of them, are God’s friends. In Western-language studies the word is often translated as “saint,” though this cannot work in the Koran, where Satan also has “friends.” In Shi’ism, God’s true friends are the Imams, beginning with ‘Alī (on friendship in terms of the word *walī*, see Hermann Landolt, “Walāya,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* [New York: MacMillan, 1987], vol. 15, pp. 316-23]. Another example of a word that overlaps with the notion of friendship is *ukhuwwa*, “brotherhood.” This word also has Koranic roots, especially the verse, “The believers indeed are brothers” (49:10). Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) devotes one of the forty books of his magnum opus, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, to the concept. See the translation by Muhtar Holland, *The Duties of Brotherhood in Islam*, 2nd edition (The Islamic Foundation, 2010).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 194-95 (for love’s indefinability); and p. 196, verse 2189 (for the endlessness of explanation).

^{iv} *Fīhi mā fīhi*, edited by B. Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), p. 35. For a different translation of the passage, in context, see A. J. Arberry, *Discourses of Rumi* (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 46.

^v *Fīhi*, p. 64; *Discourses*, p. 205.