

Love in Islamic Thought¹

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Western studies of Islam have paid relatively little attention to love. Early scholars were heirs to a long history of European animosity toward this upstart religion and tended to assume that love was a Christian monopoly. When Muslim writing on love did come to their attention, they typically considered it peripheral or borrowed, often by classifying it as “Sufi.” As Carl Ernst explains, “The term *Sufi-ism* was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, as an appropriation of those portions of ‘Oriental’ culture that Europeans found attractive. The essential feature of the definitions of Sufism that appeared at this time was the insistence that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam” (Ernst 1997, p. 9). The tendency to place Sufism on the margins of the Islamic tradition has persisted in Western literature, even though so-called mainstream Islamic theology has always been an elite enterprise with relatively little influence on the Muslim masses, while Sufi teachings have permeated most Muslim societies down into recent times.

One of the first scholarly expositions of love in Islamic thought came with Emil Fackenheim’s 1944 translation of “The treatise on love” by Avicenna (d. 1037), the greatest of the early Muslim philosophers. In 1955 Helmut Ritter published a comprehensive historical analysis of love theories, part of his massive study of the great Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221; English translation 2003, especially pp. 360-592). Lois Anita Giffen surveyed a series of classical Arabic texts on interpersonal love in *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs* (1971). Joseph Norment Bell (1979) wrote a careful study of the role of love in the writings of well-known Hanbalite theologians like Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). William Chittick surveyed the teachings of Rūmī (d. 1273) in *The Sufi Path of Love* (1983). Binyamin Abrahamov summarized the views of Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn Dabbāgh (d. 1296) in *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism* (2003) and wrote a good outline of the role played by love in the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī, arguably the foremost Muslim theoretician of love (Abrahamov 2009). Chittick analyzed the major themes of love as they apply to theology, cosmology, and spiritual psychology in *Divine Love* (2013a), arguing that love stands at the center of the Islamic tradition.

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Important English translations of theological and mystical treatises on love include the first Arabic book combining Sufi and philosophical views (Daylamī 2006); Muḥammad al-Ghazālī’s chapters on love from his Arabic *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Ghazālī 2011) and his Persian *Kīmīyā-yi sa‘ādat* (Ghazālī 2002); the most famous Persian prose classic on love, the *Sawāniḥ* of al-Ghazālī’s younger brother, Aḥmad (d. 1126; Aḥmad Ghazālī 1986); the poetical works of the greatest Arabic love poet, Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235; Homerin 2001); the *Lama‘āt*, a Persian prose classic on love by a second-generation student of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 1289; ‘Irāqī 1982); and *Beauty and Love* by Şeyh Galip (d. 1799; Galip 2005), a Turkish poet whose work shows the manner in which earlier theories of love were integrated into later literature.

If relatively few modern scholars have concerned themselves with love in Islamic thought, this is partly because most have focused either on jurisprudence, with its multifarious social and political repercussions, or dialectical theology (Kalam). The concerns and methodological presuppositions of these two schools left little room for love. Jurists addressed right and wrong activity, and the most they could say was that sexual love has legitimate and illegitimate forms. Dialectical theologians stressed divine transcendence to such a degree that they considered God’s love for human beings as nothing but His concern for their welfare, and human love for God as obedience to His commands. Naturally, this interpretation was much to the liking of the jurists, since it bolstered their authority and social status. Ibn al-‘Arabī was objecting to the approach of dialectical theology when he wrote, “If we had remained with our rational proofs—which, in the opinion of the rational thinkers, establish knowledge of God’s Essence, showing that ‘He is not like this’ and ‘not like that’—no created thing would ever have loved God” (Chittick 1989, p. 180).

Two other schools that addressed theological issues understood love as central both to God and to all contingent reality. The first to appear historically was philosophy, an elite undertaking that had a disproportionate influence on theological thinking generally. The second was Sufism, which developed the implications of divine and human love in by far the most detail. In using the word Sufism I am referring to a wide variety of influential teachers and saints, many of whom wrote books, some prolifically (Chittick 2008b). Like philosophers, Sufis described love as a divine energy that brings about the creation of the universe and drives every individual being to its own perfection. Avicenna summarizes this understanding in his typical style: “If the Absolute Good did not disclose Itself, nothing would be received from It. If nothing were received from It, nothing would exist..., for Its self-disclosure (*tajalli*) is the cause of every existence. And since, by Its very existence, It loves the existence of everything caused by It, It loves the reception of Its self-disclosure” (Chittick 2013a, p. 286). For their part Sufis preferred the mythic language of the Qur’an and Hadith. In making the same point that Avicenna just made, they would typically cite the divine saying, “I was a Hidden

Treasure, and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized” (Chittick 2013a, pp. 18-19). Much more than the philosophers, Sufis stressed the practical teachings of the Qur’an, specifically that human beings must respond to God’s creative love by loving Him in return. They disseminated their teachings not only by personal example, but also by writing books and immensely popular poetry, which was recited and sung among all tiers of society, even the illiterate.

Scholars who wrote about love acknowledged the impossibility of defining it, generally taking the position that either you have experienced love, in which case you know what it is, or you have not, in which case it cannot be explained to you. Nonetheless, they were happy to elaborate upon its signs and symptoms, and this explains why many books, not to mention reams of poetry, were written in celebration of its joys and sorrows. Scholars with a meticulous bent listed subtle differences in connotation among as many as eighty Arabic words designating love (Giffen 1971, pp. 83-96; Bell 1979, pp. 148-81). The Qur’an itself, as a recent study has shown (Ghazi 2013), uses nearly thirty words to specify varieties of love.

Two Qur’anic words are typically translated as love, *ḥubb* and *wudd*, the first of which became the standard term in later discussions. From the second is derived the Qur’anic divine name, *al-wadūd*, the Loving. The most important related divine attributes is *raḥma*, mercy or compassion, a motherly quality that belies the patriarchal image of God put forth by jurists and dialectical theologians. The word *raḥma* is derived from the word *raḥim*, “womb,” a point that leads to subtle meditations on divine creativity (Murata 1993, pp. 203-22). The Qur’an makes mercy a fundamental attribute of God, as in the verse, “Call upon God, or call upon the All-Merciful; whichever you call upon, to Him belong the most beautiful names” (17:110). God makes His motherly mercy more fundamental than His patriarchal face in the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, “My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.” The Prophet said that God is more merciful to His servant than any mother to her child, and those who quote this saying typically have in mind the universal meaning of the word servant, as in the Qur’anic verse, “There is nothing in the heavens and the earth that does not come to the All-Merciful as a servant” (19:93). The Qur’an confirms this interpretation when it says that God’s mercy “embraces everything” (7:156), which is to say that His motherly love extends to all that exists.

Mercy’s important role in much of Islamic thought is prefigured by the formula that begins practically every chapter of the Qur’an: “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.” Grammatically these two names of mercy, *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*, mean the same thing. The fact that God calls Himself by two names with the same meaning led to numerous meditations on the varieties of divine mercy and the manner in which they reverberate throughout the universe and the human soul. The general picture is that God as All-Merciful

creates the universe and all that it contains, and God as Ever-Merciful responds to those who love Him with additional love and mercy (Chittick 2013a, pp. 23-35).

The Qur'an does not name any objects of God's love other than human beings, while it stresses that He has a special love for those who manifest His qualities and characteristics. Here the notion of beauty plays a prominent role, and indeed the aesthetic dimension to love, so prominent in the theoretical writings and the poetic tradition, is obvious in the Qur'an. The Prophet famously said that God is beautiful and He loves beauty, using the word *jamāl*, a saying that clearly implies that God's first object of love is Himself, the possessor of absolute beauty. As later teachers explain, His unity demands that in Himself He be lover, beloved, and love (Daylamī 2005, p. 59; al-Ghazālī 2011, pp. 101-2).

In talking of beauty, the Qur'an uses the word *ḥusn*, a synonym for *jamāl*. Translators often render *ḥusn* and derivatives as "good," with an unfortunate loss of connotation. After all, the Qur'an describes God as possessing "the most beautiful names" (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), and few would read this as "the best names." The Book alludes to the correspondence between divine and human beauty in the verse, "We created man in the most beautiful stature" (95:4). This helps explain why the Prophet said, echoing the Hebrew Bible, that God created Adam in His own image.

In sixteen verses the Qur'an declares that God loves specific individuals, designating them by their beautiful traits. Most frequently (five times) it mentions the *muḥsinūn*, the "beautiful-doers," that is, those who live up to their own "most beautiful stature" by putting it into practice. Next most commonly it mentions the *muttaqūn*, the "godwary," those who are constantly aware of God's presence and take care to observe His instructions. Another twenty-three verses mention ugly traits and activities that God does *not* love, such as transgression, wrongdoing, ingratitude, and arrogance.

In the Persianate world the preferred word for love was usually the non-Qur'anic *ʿishq*, which also played a prominent role in Arabic love poetry and was used by scholars to translate the Greek *eros*. When the philosophical fraternity known as the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', 10th century) wrote an Arabic treatise on love, they used *ʿishq* in the title and described how it is found in all that exists, though they also used the word *ḥubb* when talking about the mutual love between God and man. For his part Avicenna used the word *ʿishq* exclusively in his treatise on love, describing it as a quality present in God and all things. The dialectical theologians rejected the use of *ʿishq* in reference to God, while some of the early Sufis considered it permissible and others did not (al-Ghazālī 2013, pp. xv-xvii; Bell 1979, pp. 162-67). In his seminal Persian treatise on love, Aḥmad Ghazālī had no doubt about the word's appropriateness for both divine and human love, and after him *ʿishq* and *ḥubb* were frequently used interchangeably in Persian and other Islamic languages (Lumbard 2007).

One of the most common Persian words for love is *dūstī*, which also means friendship. In early texts it was used to translate not only *ḥubb* but also *walāya*, which is derived from *walī*, friend. The Qur'an says that God is the friend of the believers and that the believers are the friends of God. The word gradually came to be applied to deceased Muslims revered by the community, which helps explain why Western scholars have usually translated it as saint. Theoretical works on divine friendship explained what it implied for the human soul, though dialectical theologians were not happy with the notion (Landolt 1987; Radtke and O'Kane 1996; Chodkiewicz 1993; Renard 2008).

Western scholars have sometimes spoken of two basic approaches to love, the profane and the mystical (or sacred), though they acknowledge that it is difficult to draw a line (Giffen 1971, p. xi; Bell and Al Shafie 2005, p. xi). Some of the outstanding authors of books on profane love, such as Muḥammad ibn Dāwūd (d. 910), were also major religious scholars (Giffen 1971, p. 8). Indeed the most famous text in the genre, *Ṭawq al-ḥamāma* ("The Ring of the Dove"), translated into several European languages, was written by the Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), one of the foremost jurists and theologians of his time (Ibn Ḥazm 1953).

Cosmic and Human Love

Thought about love can be considered Islamic when it goes back to the three principles of faith, which are *tawḥīd* (the assertion of divine unity), prophecy, and the Return to God. The first and second principles are set down succinctly in the Shahadah: "There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is God's Messenger." The first half of this formula, commonly called the sentence that asserts (God's) unity (*kalimat al-tawḥīd*), means that nothing is truly divine but God, nothing truly real but the Real, nothing truly merciful but the All-Merciful, and so on with every divine name. The second half means that God reveals Himself to human beings with the goal of guiding them to their ultimate good. The two statements have countless implications for the human situation, perhaps the most important of which is the third principle: all things return to God, willingly or unwillingly (Murata and Chittick 1994, Chapter 3; Chittick 2010a; Chittick 2012b, Chapter 1).

Given that the Shahadah addresses first the reality of God and second God's relationship with human beings, it gave rise to two basic ways of envisaging God: in Himself and in relation to man. In Himself, God is the absolute truth and reality that rules over all that exists, whether guidance or misguidance, beauty or ugliness, love or hatred. In relation to man, God is the guide who offers criteria to differentiate between beauty and ugliness and issues instructions on how to cling to the one and avoid the other. From the standpoint of God in Himself, all things are beautiful, for "He made beautiful all that He created" (Qur'an 32:7). From the standpoint of God as guide, some things are beautiful and some ugly. In other terms,

God as All-Merciful encompasses all things, whereas God as Ever-Merciful singles out for special favors those who choose the beautiful over the ugly. By and large, philosophers stressed the reality of God in Himself, whereas dialectical theologians and jurists claimed that God as guide trumps all else. Sufi theoreticians strove to find a balance between the two standpoints.

Just as Muslim thinkers distinguished between God in Himself and God as guide, so also they spoke of two sorts of divine love: a universal love for all human beings and all creation, and a particular love for those who put love for God into practice (Chittick 2012a; 2013a, pp. 9-11). God loves everything that He created—beautiful and ugly, pious and sinner, saved and damned—and as the All-Merciful He bestows mercy on all creatures without exception. This universal mercy, however, does not guarantee the salvation of any given individual (though some thinkers, following the logic of universality, disagree; Chittick 2005, Chapter 9). God as the Ever-Merciful guides human beings, the unique possessors of free will, and tells them that He has a special, saving love for those who freely strive to become adorned with beauty, love, compassion, forgiveness, and other divine attributes. That God should have these two sorts of love should not be surprising, since we take its analogue for granted in human affairs. A mother may have an unconditional love for her child, but this does not contradict her desire for the child to be on its own and actualize its full possibilities.

Sufi authors, with their constant concern to bring out the deeper implications of the Qur'an, found a reference to God's unconditional love in two clauses extracted from verse 5:54: "He loves them, and they love Him." This abbreviated verse was cited more often than any other Qur'anic verse in discussions of love. It was typically read as a statement that God loves human beings eternally and unconditionally, and that human beings love God by their very nature. Scholars acknowledged that it can also be read as a statement of conditional love, especially when put back into the context of the whole verse (Chittick 2013a, pp. 9-10).

Given God's eternity, "He loves them" means that God loves human beings outside of time and without regard to their situation in the universe. He has known them forever just as they are, and He created them because of love while knowing all their faults and shortcomings (Chittick 2013a, Chapter 2). In one of numerous passages explaining God's unconditional love, Aḥmad Sam'ānī (d. 1140), probably the greatest theologian of love writing in the Persian language, put these words into God's mouth:

"If I were to let you go free, to whom would I give you? If I did not want you, to whom would I leave you? Even if you become weary of My gentleness, I will not become weary of your disobedience. Even if you cannot carry My burden, My great mercy will buy you along with all your offenses." (Chittick 2013a, p. 102)

Understandably, dialectical theologians, with their focus on God as guide, were

unhappy with those who spoke of God's universal love, not least because they feared people would trust in God's mercy and ignore the revealed law. They stressed Qur'anic references to love's conditionality, verses saying that people will receive God's love only if they follow His guidance; e.g., "Surely those who have faith and do wholesome deeds, to them the All-Merciful will assign love" (19:96). Western studies of love have mostly followed the lead of the dialectical theologians, often reaching the conclusion that Islam does not have a notion of unconditional love, in contrast to the New Testament (Rahbar 1960; Nickel 2009).

Just as "He loves them" was often understood as a statement of the divine nature, a statement that is always and forever true, so also the following clause, "they love Him" was understood as a statement of human nature, a fact of life that extends ad infinitum. As for the claim of many people that they do not love God, this can be chalked up to ignorance. One of the common ways of explaining this ignorance was to distinguish between real and metaphorical love, terminology that has in view the well known saying, "The metaphor is the bridge to the reality" (*al-majāz qaṅṭarat al-ḥaqīqa*). Lovers who think that they love other than God, whatever the other may be, have taken the metaphor as the reality. As Rūmī sometimes says, people should not be satisfied with sunlight on a wall but should turn back to the sun itself (Chittick 1983, p. 202).

Echoing Avicenna, Ibn al-ʿArabī writes, "There is nothing in the existent realm that is not a lover" (Chittick 2005, p. 33). What makes human beings unique in their love is that they alone were created in God's image, which means that they alone can recognize God in Himself and love Him for Himself, even if they usually confuse the metaphor with the reality. Creatures like plants, animals, and angels also love God, but they love Him for the existence and blessings that they receive from Him. When people love God for what they can get, they fail to live up to their human stature.

In short, when the Qur'an says, "They love Him," this can mean that human beings love God by nature. Their love for Him is real, and love for anything else is metaphorical and illusory. The Qur'an criticizes metaphorical love in many verses, as when it speaks of "love for appetites: women, children, heaped-up heaps of gold and silver, horses of mark, cattle, tillage" (3:14). This is not to say that love for others is illegitimate, simply that love for metaphors must be subordinated to love for the absolute Reality. The Qur'an mentions among God's blessings that He established "love and mercy" (30:21) between spouses, and various hadiths point out that people should love each other as a function of their love for God (Chittick 2013a, pp. 330-38).

Inasmuch as the verse of mutual love—"He loves them, and they love Him"—is a statement of the actual situation, it offers no prescription for curing addiction to metaphors. The Qur'an mentions the cure in the second most commonly cited verse on love: "Say [O

Muhammad!]: ‘If you love God, follow me; God will love you’” (3:31). Once people recognize that they love God by nature, they will understand that they need help to put their love into practice. Help comes in the form of prophetic guidance, which explains how people should go about loving God.

When people actively engage in the quest for God by following the prophetic model, they are attempting to overcome ugliness and actualize beauty. The beautiful qualities that may accrue to their souls are the main topic in philosophical and theological ethics as well as in countless volumes written by Sufi teachers. Philosophers had the divine beauty in mind when they spoke of the goal of human life as “deiformity” (*ta’alluh*) or, as al-Ghazālī and most Sufis preferred, “becoming characterized by the character traits of God” (*al-takhalluq bi akhlāq allāh*; Chittick 2011a). Avicenna sums up Islamic ethics when he explains that God loves those who have achieved deiformity: “The love of the Most Excellent for Its own excellence is the most excellent love, so Its true beloved is that Its self-disclosure be received. This is the reality of Its reception by deiform souls. This is why it may be said that they are Its beloveds” (Chittick 2013a, pp. 286-87).

Many Sufis talked about actualizing beautiful character traits in terms of ascending stations (*maqām*) on the path to God. They made clear that beauty of character means conformity with the soul of the Prophet, whom the Qur’an describes as possessing a “magnificent character” (68:4). To the degree that his followers succeed in emulating his beauty, God will love them: “Follow me; God will love you.” If jurists qua jurists could only say that following the Prophet is to act as the Prophet acted, Sufi teachers held that following him demands transformation of the soul (Chittick 2013a, pp. 150ff.).

Love’s Consummation

In short, from the divine standpoint, God loves human beings unconditionally. This, however, does not necessarily mean that His love will bring about their happiness after death, even if, as the Qur’an puts it, “God forgives sins altogether” (39:53). Although God as Creator loves all creatures, God as guide loves people who follow His guidance and strive to recover their own innate love for Him. In discussing the third principle of faith, the return to God, dialectical theologians spoke of reward and punishment, felicity and wretchedness, paradise and hell. The troubadours of love responded that all this is well and good, because people owe it to their Creator to follow His guidance. But acting in fear of hell or in hope for paradise is not love. It is the work of mercenaries. If you expect a payback, that is self-interest. Lovers forget themselves and surrender totally to their beloved.

In their treatise on love the Brethren of Purity concluded that the most adequate definition of love is “intense yearning for unification,” adding that unification (*ittiḥād*) pertains

specifically to the soul and spirit, which is to say that it cannot properly belong to bodily things (Chittick 2013a, pp. 280-83). In the more graphic language preferred by Sufi teachers and poets, the goal of love is “union” (*wiṣāl*), a word that was also used for sexual love. Here a third scriptural reference to love, this time a *ḥadīth qudsī* (an extra-Qur’anic saying of God narrated by the Prophet), is quoted almost as often as the two mentioned Qur’anic verses: “My servant never ceases drawing near to Me through good works until I love him, and when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand through which he holds, and the foot with which he walks.” This is a strikingly explicit statement of the situation of a human soul that has followed the divine guidance and reached union with the true Beloved.

In talking of the ascending stages on the path to God, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī is not untypical when he says that love is the highest (Ghazālī 2002, p. 1; 2011, p. 2). His brother Aḥmad took the position that love is in fact a proper designation for the Absolute Reality in Itself. Once it is actualized, both lover and beloved cease to exist, for the divine unity does not allow for duality (Chittick 2013a, pp. 418-20; Lumbard 2007). Aḥmad and others point out that by following in the Prophet’s footsteps, lovers are trying to surrender themselves to love. Once love takes over, nothing remains of human volition. Such loss of volition is in fact a matter of common experience in metaphorical love, which can render people helpless before its power. One historian of the early period of Arabic love poetry sums up the lover’s surrender to love in terms that apply equally to later Sufi poetry: “The poet-lover places his beloved on a pedestal and worships her from afar. He is obsessed and tormented; he becomes debilitated, ill, and is doomed to a love-death” (Allen 2000, p. 105).

Sufis expounded the nature of love with the goal of bringing people to acknowledge their own existential plight, that is, their separation from what they truly love. If people could achieve union, the story would be over, because human nature would be utterly effaced. Most authors, however, held that full union can never be reached before death. Some said explicitly that love goes on forever—what else can explain the everlasting bliss of paradise and the endless torment of hell? After all, paradise and hell are simply designations for union and separation in the language of reward and punishment (Chittick 1979, p. 156; Chittick 2013a, pp. 345-46).

Love demands death to self-centeredness and rebirth in the beloved. Here a saying of the Prophet is often quoted by theorists of both profane and sacred love: “He who loves, conceals, stays chaste, and dies, dies a martyr.” Stories of lovers who die in yearning for their beloved are standard fare in Islamic literature (Giffen 1971, pp. 99-115; Chittick 1983a, pp. 183-86; 2013a, pp. 369-75). Sufi authors often held up the famous martyr al-Ḥallāj as an example of a lover who gladly embraces death for his Beloved (Massignon 1982; Ernst 1985). Some went so

far as to cite Iblis (Satan) as the model lover. So devoted was he to his true Beloved that he was ready to suffer the pain of everlasting separation if that is what his Beloved wanted (Awn 1983).

Coming back to love poetry in all its varieties, nothing is more typical of the genre than celebrating the beauty of the beloved and bemoaning the plight of the lover. This in fact is the overall theme of Sufi literature and, one could argue, the Qur'an itself: Human beings exist in a state of suffering because they do not have what they want. They are lovers by nature, and metaphorical love can only satisfy temporarily. A great Qur'an commentator like Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (6th/12th century) interpreted all stories of the prophets as descriptions of the trials and tribulations of lovers in their quest for union (Maybudī 2014). In this reading, the Qur'an guides people to a true awareness of themselves, and such awareness is nothing but the painful recognition of separation from what they really love. In the very first line of his 25,000-verse love epic, the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī points out that separation is the crux of love: "Listen to this reed as it complains, telling the tale of separation." Thus did Sufi teachers place love at the center of Islamic thought and practice, explaining its significance in the context of the three principles—*tawḥīd*, prophecy, and the Return. They spoke of religiosity not by splitting theological hairs or enumerating juridical do's and don't's, but rather by stirring up nostalgia for the true Beloved in their listeners' hearts.

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