



Contentment, Satisfaction and Good-Pleasure: *Rida* in Early Sufi Moral Psychology

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Abstract: The article examines early Sufi notions of *rida*, usually translated as “contentment,” “satisfaction,” and “good-pleasure.” It does so through a close textual analysis of some of the most important works of the tradition authored up until what has been identified as the “formative period of Sufi literature,” a period which ends in the 11th century. In the process, the article situates *rida* within the larger context of early Islamic moral psychology as it was formulated by the fledgling Sufi tradition. The article analyses early definitions of *rida*, the role of *rida* in tribulation, contentment and the ills of complaint, the higher levels of *rida*, and the role of love in *rida*. It ends with a brief overview of the paradox of *rida* inherent within a largely deterministic theology which traces all acts back to God.

Résumé : L'article examine les premières notions soufi de *rida*, qui se traduisent habituellement par « contentement », « satisfaction » et « bon-plaisir ». Ceci fait une analyse textuelle proche de certains des travaux les plus importants de la tradition, qui ont été écrits jusqu'au temps qu'on a identifié comme la « période formative de la littérature soufie », une période qui se termine elle-même au XI^{ème} siècle. Dans le processus, l'article situe *rida* dans le contexte étendu de la première psychologie morale islamique, telle qu'elle était formulée par cette tradition soufie. L'article étudie les premières définitions de *rida*, *rida* et sa fonction dans la tribulation, le contentement et les maux de doléance, des niveaux élevés de *rida* et le rôle d'amour. Finalement, ceci se termine par un aperçu

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du paradoxe de *rida*, inhérente dans une théologie déterministe, qui en fait retrace tous ces pas jusqu'à Dieu.

Keywords

Islam, Sufism, Sufi thought, moral psychology, contentment, satisfaction, good-pleasure, *rida*

Mots clés

l'Islam, le Soufisme, la pensée soufie, la psychologie morale, le contentement, la satisfaction, le bon-plaisir, *rida*

Introduction

The Sufi tradition traces its own origins to the interior life of the Prophet of Islam, in particular, to his “inner *sunna*”¹ as well as certain pivotal events in his religious career. At the forefront of the latter lay what are believed by Muslims to be his experiences of the reception of the Qur'an through the Angel of Revelation on the Night of Power as well as his ascent through the levels of existence into the divine presence on the Night of the Mi'raj. As a distinct historical phenomenon, however, Sufism, or as it is known in Arabic, *tasawwuf*, emerged during the later period of the Umayyad Empire (661–750 CE) and the early period of the Abbasid Empire (750–1250 CE) out of a widespread group of renunciants, many of whom, as a mark of worldly detachment, held to the particular habit of donning garments of wool (*suf*). According to the most commonly accepted view, this practice gave rise to the term *sufi* (= “wool wearer”) to mark those characterized by renunciation in the early, formative period of Islam. Although the details remain unclear, it is generally believed that these renunciants formed a kind of protest movement which was responding to what it considered to be the deleterious social and religious consequences of the newfound wealth and power of the Islamic Empire. With wealth and power came lifestyles which betrayed, in the eyes of the renunciants, the perceived sincerity and otherworldliness of the earliest Muslims.

From within the various theological conversations which were taking place in the communities of renunciants in the first century of the Islamic calendar, there eventually developed elaborate discourses on moral and spiritual self-transformation which mapped out the various “states” and “stations” of inner change, beginning first of all with repentance. In due time these discourses laid the foundations for an Islamic moral and spiritual psychology. This was a psychology rooted in the Islamic vision of the universe with the Prophet as a model of human perfection. Although some of the early figures of the Sufi tradition spoke of the higher reaches of human consciousness as well as the theoretical implications of a notion of divine unity grounded in a direct and unmediated experience of God, the primary concerns of the early Sufi discourses lay in more practical matters. This becomes evident when we examine the earliest extant Sufi treatises, the main focus of which was on *praxis* (*mu'amala*), that is to say, on aiding the spiritual seeker to grow and mature on the Path, and on protecting her from the trappings of her own psyche and

the demons of her own inner world.² This point was highlighted by Laury Silvers when she observed that “the treatises and manuals that are the most visible face of early Sufism and the early institutional period tend to focus on the basics of the spiritual path and less so on theoretical questions” (2004: 71).

The aim of *praxis*-oriented Sufism was to direct the spiritual traveler to an experience and knowledge of God through an inner cleansing and purification of self. Though principally pragmatic, the treatises of practical Sufism did not consist of a simple list of injunctions and prohibitions drawn through an analytic study of the formal precepts of Scripture. Were that to have been the case, there would have been little to separate this science from jurisprudence. Although, like jurisprudence, it was prescriptive in nature, its foundations lay largely in meditative introspection, close examination of conscience, and a prolonged reflection over those Scriptural passages which addressed the inner life of the believer. Even though many of the most well-known early representatives of this science had close ties to jurisprudence and its culture, it developed out of the fruits of their asceticism, contemplation, prayer and inner-life.³

Among the ethical and moral concepts which the early treatises explored were such notions as patience, gratitude, trust in God, love, fear and hope. The purpose of this article is to explore one such concept, namely *rida*. The Arabic term is variously defined as “contentment,” “satisfaction,” and “good-pleasure” (Lane: c.v., “*rida*”; Ibn Manzur, 1997: vol. 5, 235–237). It is a term that, in its Qur’anic and later Islamic usage, is applicable to God and the human being. The reciprocal relationship is best exemplified by the Qur’anic expression, “God has *rida* with them and they have *rida* with God” (Q 5:119; 9:100; 57:22; 98:8). It was this reciprocity which led Louis Massignon to define *rida* as a state of “acceptance and contentment between God and the soul” (1997: 134).

The following analysis of *rida* will be undertaken with a specific focus on Sufi texts authored up until the end of what has been identified as the formative period of Sufi literature.⁴ This is a period which ends in the middle of the 11th century with the seminal contributions of Qushayri (d. 1072), author of the widely circulated *Treatise*, and Hujwiri (d. 1077), author of the first major compendium of Sufi thought in Persian, the *Unveiling of the Veiled*. These works along with the ones which preceded them became the basis for the much more elaborate inquiries into moral and spiritual questions that would be undertaken by later luminaries. The analysis below is divided into six parts. It begins with a survey of early definitions of *rida*, followed by a study of the role of *rida* in tribulation, the ills of complaint, the higher levels of *rida*, love and *rida*, and finally, the paradox of *rida* in a pre-destinarian theology.

Definitions of Rida in Early Sufi Moral Psychology

Perhaps the most concise definition of *rida* within early Sufism was formulated by Muhasibi (d. 857), considered by many to be the first great moral psychologist of the tradition, in his *Book of Resolution and the Return to God*. Although the definition appears to be that of an anonymous spiritual master, given within the context of a dialogue, the words are put in the mouth of a teacher as part of a didactic strategy, partly to hold the attention of the reader, who feels as if he is privy to a conversation in which his own queries and objections are voiced though the master’s interlocutor. Many of

Muhasibi's analyses are couched in similar dialogical, question-and-answer formats, though such a literary device was by no means unique to Muhasibi.

I asked, "what is the meaning of *rida*?" He replied, "the joy of the heart with the passing of the divine decree."⁵ I then asked, "what is its opposite?" He replied, "*sakhat*."⁶ I asked, "What is the meaning of *sakhat*?" to which he replied, "dissatisfaction of the heart, its *sakhat*, and its dislike for the occurrence of the divine decree, as well as the heart's many wishes for control." (2003b: 174)

In a manner characteristic of much of the religious literature of the classical subtraditions of Sunni Islam, Muhasibi then justifies the perspective through an appeal to the views of the early Muslim community, in this case, two close disciples of the Prophet.

It was once said to Abu Bakr [the first caliph], may God be pleased with him (during an illness), "shall we call a physician for you?" to which he replied, "He has already seen me." It was then said to him, "What did He say to you?" He replied, "... Verily, I do as I please."⁷ And Uthman, may God be pleased with him, asked 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud in his sickness, "What is your complaint?" He replied, "my sins." It was then said to him, "What do you desire?" He replied, "the mercy of God." It was then said to him, "Shall we not call a physician for you?" to which he replied, "the Physician is the one who made me sick." (2003b: 174)

Muhasibi's definition of *rida* highlights the antonymic relation between *rida* and *sakhat* found in the Qur'an,⁸ and underscores what would become a recurring theme in virtually every major Sufi analysis of *rida*, namely, that of reposing in the divine will.⁹ This is why Junayd (d. 910), Muhasibi's most famous student, sometimes identified as the patriarch of Sufism, would himself define *rida* as the "relinquishing of choice," a view that would be echoed by other prominent early Sufis (Sarraj, 2001: 50). Ruwaym (d. 915) defined *rida* as the "anticipation of the decrees (of God) with joy" (Kalabadhi, 1935: 93), while Ibn 'Ata' (d. 922) declared that it is "the heart's regard for what God chose for the servant at the beginning of time, and it is abandoning displeasure (*tasakhkhut*)" (Qushayri, 2002a: 362; Sarraj, 2001: 50). Qushayri mentions a telling incident from the grandson of Islam's Prophet in his *Treatise*, one of the most influential works of early Sufism. In this incident he retraces, like Muhasibi before him, this understanding of the nature of human *rida* back to the early Muslim community. When news reached Husayn b. Abi Talib (d. 680) of the words of Abu Dharr (d. 652), that "poverty is dearer to me than wealth, and illness dearer to me than health," he felt compelled to voice his disagreement: "One who has trust in the beautiful choice of God most High for him," he declared, "will not hope for anything other than what God most High has chosen for him" (Qushayri, 2002a: 361).

But *rida*, as already noted, is not a quality restricted to the human being. Even though the Qur'an employs *rida* in reference to God in nearly half of its occurrences,¹⁰ in the early Sufi tradition the emphasis lay, for the most part, in determining the nature not of divine but of human *rida*, as well as the means through which one could internalize the latter. This much, however, was explicitly stated about divine *rida*: it is the

consequence of the human being's fulfillment of the commands of God,¹¹ on the one hand, and the result of human *rida*, on the other. If the human being meets God with *rida* for His decree, then God will meet the human being with His own *rida*, since a prophetic tradition has God declare, "He who has *rida* encounters My *rida* when he meets Me, and he who has *sakhat* encounters My *sakhat* when he meets Me" (Makki, 1995: vol. 2, 82). Elaborating on the nature of the virtue that is demanded by God, one of the early Sufis would state that there are in fact two kinds of *rida* made incumbent on the human being: *rida* with God (*rida bihi*) in so far as He is the Arranger (*mudabbir*) of affairs, and *rida* with what comes from God (*rida 'anhu*) by way of His decree.¹² The implications of this apparently inconsequential distinction would be elaborated in significant ways in the later tradition.

Rida in Tribulation

The early Sufi moral psychologists were acutely aware of the difficulties the soul faced in realizing a state of *rida* in all of its worldly affairs. It was acknowledged that to the extent that *rida* is a natural response to circumstances that are pleasing to the soul, it is not the consequence of any real moral struggle or effort, and therefore not a particularly distinctive virtue. The litmus test lies in being able to exhibit a genuine state of satisfaction in the face of the bitter blows of fate, in response to those circumstances of loss that naturally elicit distress, anxiety, suffering and pain. A famous story of Rabi'a (d. 801), founder of the love tradition in Sufism, succinctly illustrates this point. She once heard the famous jurist and ascetic Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778) pray, "O Lord, have *rida* with us," to which she responded in her characteristically acidic fashion, "Are you not ashamed to ask Him for *rida* when you yourself do not have *rida* with Him?" When pressed to describe the one who has attained the virtue in question, she explained that it is "when his joy in misfortune is like his joy in blessing" (Makki, 1995: vol. 2, 80). Her contemporary, the bandit-turned-ascetic Fudayl b. 'Iyad (d. 803), would similarly observe that one can only be characterized by *rida* when both "deprivation and (receiving) the gift (from God) are one and the same in his eyes" (Makki, 1995: vol. 2, 80).

The early texts, however, seem to be a bit unclear about the exact nature of the pleasure one experiences in response to the tribulations and difficulties of life. This ambiguity may lead one to conclude, on the basis of a somewhat cursory reading of the extant material, that satisfaction and joy in painful trials and calamities can take on the form of a warped and even sadistic pleasure in one's own suffering. But as Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq (d. 1015 or 1021), the teacher of Qushayri, would clarify, "*rida* is not that you do not feel the trial, it is only that you do not object to the divine ruling and the decree" (Qushayri, 2002a: 358). In other words, genuine *rida* does not mean that one becomes numb to all pain, or that one finds pleasure in suffering, but that the joy in submitting to the divine will far exceeds the discomfort of any tribulation which may accompany life, so that it is as if the tribulation did not exist, or as if the tribulation were no different from worldly gain. *Rida*, in this light, is the overwhelming peace which ensues from surrendering the heart to God's eternal decree, from abdicating the impulse to control one's destiny. Such a renunciation of will produces a sense of tranquility infinitely greater than any experience of discomfort or pain which may follow as a consequence of the

unpredictable and shifting sands of fate. In response then to the question of whether the pleasure of *rida* lies in the pain itself, or in something which outweighs the pain, our Sufi psychologists seem to suggest the latter.

Muhasibi explains why one must never respond to God's bitter decrees with either stoic indifference or dejectedness and despair. One must recognize, he argues, that God is just in His decree, that He is not despotic in His will. This should in turn lead one to have a good opinion (*husn al-zann*) of Him. One must also realize that "the choice of God most High is better than your own choice for yourself," since there are consequences for events which the human being does not anticipate in his short-sightedness (2003b: 174). One cannot see the full trajectory of one's life, much less one's fate in the next world. *Rida* therefore requires not only a relinquishing of one's own will before the Divine will, but a humbling of the intellect through a recognition that, in His omniscience, God has in mind the best interests of the soul. For Muhasibi one must understand that the divine physician surgically inflicts pain for one's best interests. Even His deprivation is a theodical gift, for in withholding what the soul may desire for its own perceived welfare, He manifests benevolent generosity (2003b: 174). As Sufyan al-Thawri observed, "God's withholding is actually a giving, because He withholds without miserliness or loss. His withholding is a choice, and (the consequence) of beautiful discernment (Makki, 1995: vol. 2, 89).

We can further understand the reasoning behind Muhasibi's approach to *rida* by considering his explanation of human affliction. The Sufi psychologist explains how divinely ordained suffering can actually serve as a means through which the soul can draw closer to God. He says that there are three kinds of afflictions: those which serve as punishments, those which serve as a means of purification, and finally, those which represent His favor. As for the first, they are intended for a particular class of believers who are immersed in the fleeting and transient pleasures of this life. By undergoing punishments in this world for their religious laxity and sinfulness, they may be spared some of the judgment of the next world. Due, however, to their own shortsightedness, such individuals often respond to trials and tribulations with bitterness, impatience and discontentment. Secondly, there are cathartic afflictions, intended for spiritual novices who desire God, but who remain in need of inner cleansing in order to grow in illumination and divine knowledge. The novices respond to afflictions with resignation and patience, knowing that they are from God and for the ultimate welfare of their own souls. But because they are beginners on the Path, they are incapable of meeting such causes of suffering with joy. Finally, there are afflictions which represent His favor and which are reserved for His elect. They represent divine favor because through such afflictions the most elevated of souls manifest their complete and total *rida* with God, thereby rising to greater heights of virtue, drawing even closer to God. They understand the wisdom, justice and mercy behind the decree and respond with neither bitterness nor patience. Instead they happily embrace the divine will without personal desire (Smith, 1935: 232–233).¹³ Muhasibi would no doubt concur that it was this kind of state which the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Aziz (d. 720) was alluding to when he declared, "I awoke and (found that) there was no joy (for me) except in places of the divine decree" (Makki, 1995: vol. 2, 77). The superiority of *rida* in relation to patience, highlighted by Muhasibi, is also found in Makki, author of the *Nourishment of the Hearts*,

one of the most important early manuals of Sufism, when he claims, “patience with the rulings (of God) is the station of the people of faith, while *rida* with them is the station of the people of certainty” (1995: vol. 2, 89).¹⁴

The Upper Reaches of Rida

Thus far we have seen how *rida* is the consequence of joyously resigning oneself to the divine decree. But there is also another way to explain the experience of complete and total *rida*, but one which is applicable to more advanced stages of spiritual realization. The higher levels of *rida* are reserved for those who become so immersed in their contemplation of God that the world, with its joys and pains, recedes into the background. The affairs of the world become eclipsed for such folk by the overpowering luminosity of the Arranger of Affairs. Through an experience of self-transcendence, they are able to rise beyond earthly experiences of suffering and joy to behold the One in an experience of divine unity. *Rida*, in such a state, is the consequence not of an act of the intellect, where one acknowledges the justice and wisdom of the divine decree, nor of the will, where one surrenders it to God, but an experience of being blinded by the light of God. “[H]e who is satisfied with the affliction that God sends,” explains Hujwiri of one who experiences *rida* in such a state, “is satisfied because in the affliction he sees the Author thereof and can endure its pain by contemplating Him who sent it; nay, he does not account it painful, such is his joy in contemplating his beloved” (1992: 178–179). Above such a level there are those, continues Hujwiri, whose beings become so thoroughly extinguished in the divine origin that their existence itself becomes “an illusion alike in His anger and His satisfaction; whose hearts dwell in the presence of Purity, and in the garden of Intimacy.” Those who attain such a rank “have no thought of created things and have escaped from the bonds of ‘stations’ and ‘states’ and have devoted themselves to the love of God” (1992: 178–179).¹⁵ The logic behind such an explanation is not unique to higher reaches of *rida* and can apply equally to other virtues as well. We see this in the case of definitions, for example, of the most advanced stages of gratitude. In the words of one Sufi, “gratitude consists in being unconscious of gratitude through the vision of the Benefactor” (Kalabadhi, 1935: 91).

It is worth noting that the bases for higher levels of *rida* are not always clearly distinguished from those of lower ones in the early texts.¹⁶ Such higher levels nevertheless represent what might be accurately described as a transition from the moral to the mystical plane, even though the exact line of demarcation which separates the two modes of being remains difficult if not impossible to identify. This is particularly the case when one conceives of the transition from the moral to the mystical plane from the perspective of the Sufi tradition itself, as an elevation into a greater degree of presence before God, rather than, as some have maintained, evidence of contrasting and even conflicting expressions or typologies of religiosity.¹⁷

Contentment and the Ills of Complaint

The nature of *rida* is such that it is organically interconnected with other virtues – with some more closely than others. Perhaps its closest relationship is with *qana’a*, which

connotes the idea of “contentment” in a more restricted sense. While the semantic field of *rida* includes the notion of contentment, it also signifies much more. In Sufi psychology *qana'a* is typically understood to refer to one of the first stages of *rida*. This point was made by Abu Sulayman al-Darani (d. 830), when he observed that “the relation of *qana'a* to *rida* is like the relation of abstinence (*wara'*) to renunciation (*zuhd*): *qana'a* is the first stage of *rida*, and abstinence is the first stage of renunciation” (Qushayri, 2002a: 311–312).¹⁸ Makki would also relegate *qana'a* to the preliminary stages of *rida* when he stated that the “first (level) of *rida* is *qana'a*” (1995: vol. 2, 98). The extremely close relation allowed the early Sufi texts to address *qana'a* within larger discussions of the much more central Qur'anic concept of *rida*.¹⁹ The *Treatise* is one of the few major works of the early period to devote a separate chapter exclusively to *qana'a*, but even here Qushayri explicitly notes the peculiarly close affinity between the two concepts by citing Darani's works quoted above. It was this affinity that allowed him to cite material in his chapter on *qana'a* that he could also have included in his chapter on *rida*. The following story represents one such example.

[‘Abd al-Wahhab said:] “I was sitting with Junayd during the days of the Hajj festival. He was surrounded by a great crowd of non-Arabs as well as those who had been brought up among the Arabs. A man approached with 500 dinars and put them before him. He said, ‘distribute them to these poor spiritual aspirants (*fuqara'*).’ Junayd inquired, ‘Do you have more?’ He replied, ‘Yes, I have much wealth.’²⁰ He then asked, ‘Do you desire more than you have?’ ‘Yes,’ he replied. Junayd then said to him, ‘Take them, for you are more in need of them than we are.’ And he did not accept them.” (Qushayri, 2002a: 314–315)

The moral of this story – best summarized by the words of Muhasibi, that “the content one is rich though he be hungry, and the covetous one is poor though he possess (much)” – makes it clear that the episode could just as logically fit into an inquiry into the nature of *rida* (Isfahani, 2002: vol. 10, 81). Indeed, Makki devotes extensive sections in his chapter on *rida* to the importance of being content with one's worldly lot, particularly in the case of those forced to live in trying or impoverished circumstances.²¹

To the extent that *rida* requires happily relinquishing one's desire in the face of divine decree, it naturally follows that one cannot attain higher levels of this virtue without first realizing contentment. It also follows that to be characterized by *qana'a* and *rida* one is obliged to refrain from complaint and finding fault in God's designs. “In the eyes of the people of *rida* (*ahl al-rida*),” writes Makki, *rida* “(entails) that the servant (of God) not say ‘this is an extremely hot day,’ or ‘this is an extremely cold day,’ or (even) that ‘poverty is an affliction and trial . . .’” (1995: vol. 2, 79). Makki provides a number of reasons why one must refrain from fault-finding. To object or complain about the divine will is to demonstrate a lack of modesty (*qillat al-haya'*) with regard to God. Such absence of modesty, as the Prophet declared, is a mark of supreme ingratitude (*kufir*) since, as Makki makes clear, it entails finding fault with the divine gift (1995: vol. 2, 83). This is particularly reprehensible because the gift is a consequence of divine help and benevolence (*altaf*).²² Such complaints also reflect a detestable character (*su' al-khuluq*) in one's relations with God, as well as impropriety and discourtesy (*su' al-adab*). Makki does not attempt to conceal the humanization²³ of God that is latent

in his reasoning. He is, in fact, explicit about the fact that one must learn how to comport oneself with God by observing the nature of the human being in his or her own interaction with others.

If someone were to prepare a meal for you, and you found fault in it and criticized it, he would detest that from you. Similarly, God detests that from you. And this falls into the knowledge of (divine) attributes, and in the meaning behind what has been said, that “the one with most knowledge of God is the one with most knowledge of himself.”²⁴ If you were to understand your own attributes through your interactions with created beings, you would come to understand from them the attributes of your Creator. (1995: vol. 2, 82–83)²⁵

In other words, one can learn of the divine response to human actions simply by observing how we respond to each other. Makki even goes so far as to say that finding fault with the things ordained by divine decree is tantamount to backbiting about God (*al-ghiba li sani'iha*), to the extent that one's intention is to raise an objection to God's decree by expressing it to someone else. Even though God is ever-present, the one who complains is not mindful of the divine presence in her complaint. This is why those characterized by scrupulousness and abstinence (*wara'*), declares Makki, refrain from blaming anything in creation. They understand that to speak ill of what God has brought into being is to speak ill of Him (1995: vol. 2, 83). Similarly, there are others who refrain from fault-finding and complaint out of their desire to comport themselves with respect and courtesy (*adab*) in the house of God (1995: vol. 2, 83).

While Makki brings to light the dangers of complaint, it is worth noting that he does not equate it with giving voice to difficulties one may be encountering in life. As long as one's intention is not to criticize or object to divine design, it remains possible, argues Makki, to speak about the taxing circumstances in which one may find oneself. Contentment therefore need not prevent one from sharing one's experiences with others. This, however, is only possible as long as one sees the trials and tribulations as acts of divine grace. “To speak about (one's) pains and to inform (others of one's) misfortunes,” writes Makki, “does not detract from the state of the one who has *rida*, provided he sees them as blessings from God, and the heart is (in a state of) surrender, well-pleased, neither embittered nor vexed with the passing of the (divine) decree” (1995: vol. 2, 89). This kind of qualification is characteristic of Makki, who, as an astute psychologist of the soul, is often careful to avoid laying down black-and-white rules on how the traveler should comport himself on the journey to God.²⁶ Naturally, before sharing the details of one's misfortunes with others, one must determine, through a process of introspection, self-accounting, and examination of conscience, one's ultimate motives and state-of-mind. Is the impulse to speak rooted in a desire to inspire others to contentment or a thinly veiled wish to draw sympathy for one's plight? Or is it even worse, a craving simply to vent? Makki is all too aware of the machinations of the lower self, and the various strategies through which it might find ways to justify a particular course of action which, though temporarily pleasant, is ultimately detrimental for the welfare of the soul. Like all great spiritual psychologists, he encourages the seeker to interiorize his consciousness and discern the reality of his inner state.

The Role of Love

Rida, as noted, is closely related to other virtues. Among them stand patience, gratitude, and trust in God. While an examination of its relation to these and other virtues lies beyond the scope of this article, a few passing observations should be made of the place of love in *rida*. This is because it is love that serves as the foundation of *rida* and ultimately makes it possible to ascend through its various levels. “When a man is truthful in his love (of God),” writes Abu Sa’id al-Kharraz (d. 899) in his *Book of Truthfulness*, “there emerges between him and God, most High, a partnership of surrender . . . he has trust in the excellent choice of the one whom He loves. He abides in his excellent direction, and tastes the food of existence through Him.” As a consequence, “his heart is filled with joy, bliss, and happiness” (Kharraz, 1937: 53 [Arabic], 43 [English]). Likewise, Hujwiri states that *rida* “is the result of love, inasmuch as the lover is satisfied with what is done by the Beloved” (1992: 180). When Abu ‘Uthman al-Hiri (d. 910) declared, “During the last forty years God has never placed me in a state that I disliked, or transferred me to another state which I resented,” Hujwiri indicated that his words signified “continual satisfaction and perfect love” (1992: 180). It was just such an intense experience of love that allowed Rabi’a, famous for her role in the development of the love tradition, to state, as we saw earlier, that the aspirant must find equal joy in both tribulations and blessings. The reason for this, she implied, was because they both have their origin in the Beloved. This sentiment was shared by many of the most prominent of the earliest Sufis. Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 860) claimed that “*rida* has three signs: abandoning personal choice before the divine decree has been decided, not experiencing any bitterness after the decree has been decided, and feeling the tumult of love in the very midst of trials” (Qushayri, 2002a: 361). Such trials, as Ghazali (d. 1111) would later say, possibly under the influence of Muhasibi, are often themselves the very consequence of God’s own love. If His servants bear them with patience, they are favored, but if they do so with *rida*, they are singled out as His chosen ones (Smith, 1935: 279). Love therefore stands as the very foundation of *rida*. Without an intense experience of love the higher reaches of *rida* remain closed. As Tirmidhi (d. 912) put it in his *Knowledge of the Friends (of God)*, *rida* is the branch of a tree of which love is the palm pith or core (*qulb*). Without love, none of the branches will bear fruit (1981: 178).

The Paradox of Rida

To what extent should the human being strive to attain *rida* within his surrounding conditions? Should one be satisfied with everything? On the basis of the narratives and sayings one encounters in the early discussions of this concept, one might conclude that the aspirant should be a passive participant in the unfolding will of God. After all, how else would one understand the moral of such stories as the following?

The story of the dervish who fell into the Tigris is well known. Seeing that he could not swim, a man on the bank cried out to him, “Shall I tell someone to bring you ashore?” The dervish said, “No.” “Then do you wish to be drowned?” “No.” “What, then, do you

wish?" The dervish replied, "That which God wishes. What have I to do with wishing?" (Hujwiri, 1992: 180)

While the incident presents a both humorous but also somewhat absurd account of the implications of total surrender to God's decree, no doubt for its didactic value, such accounts leave open the question of how one should strive to comport oneself in life, given the undeniable experience of human agency. How should one who aspires for *rida* respond to one's own moral and spiritual failings as well as the many circumstances of injustice and oppression in life that call for serious, committed action? Is the proper course to adopt a passive and inactive role, to simply allow things to remain as they are because "they are part of God's will," or can one acquiesce to such a will along with striving to improve the conditions both of the soul and of the world at large? The early texts generally do not raise these concerns in their discussions of *rida*, due no doubt to their brevity. Aside from the works of early speculative theology, it seems that it is not until the period of Ghazali that more nuanced philosophical attempts to resolve such theological dilemmas find their way into Sufi texts. It is true that in his chapter on *rida*, Qushayri notes that "it is neither permissible nor necessary that one have *rida* with all of his destiny, such as sins and the numerous trials of the Muslims," because one is bound only "to have *rida* with the decree with which he has been commanded to have *rida*" (2002a: 358–359). But Qushayri's remark is only a passing one in a discussion that runs for a few pages. He does not draw out the implications of his statement.

As far as the early texts are concerned, it is only in Makki that we encounter something of an attempt to deal with the problem at hand. Makki does not argue, in a way that might resolve the dilemma, that humans are entirely free moral agents. In line with the fledgling religious establishment of his time as it was represented by the culture of the *'ulama*, particularly the proponents of tradition, he acknowledges that all things, including human acts, are created by God. His resolution with regard to the problem of whether one should have *rida* with all things is that one should be satisfied with them only to the extent that they have their origin in God, when they are seen from the "divine side." But one should not be satisfied with them, particularly with sins, in so far as they emerge through the intermediary loci of human beings. The "decisive statement (*fasl al-khi-tab*)," writes Makki, in relation to any sin which was destined to occur, is that one should have "*rida* with it to the extent that it is from God and not with it to the extent that it is from himself" (1995: vol. 2, 90).²⁷ That is to say, when one looks at the sin from the perspective of its ultimate origin, then one may indeed be satisfied and pleased with it. One cannot, however, be satisfied with it in so far as it appears in the world through the human being. In this light, *rida* is unjustifiable when it is seen from the "human side."

Makki does not try to philosophically unravel or draw out the logic of this position. Indeed, as any reader of the *Nourishment* will quickly become aware, he does not concern himself with providing sophisticated, dialectical arguments through which he might persuade the reader of the soundness of his opinions. It would remain up to Ghazali in his *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* to take up some of this task. Thus, in his chapter on *rida*, heavily influenced, like the rest of his magnum opus, by the *Nourishment*,²⁸ Ghazali provides an example worth mentioning which demonstrates his ability, as a

creative theologian, to square the circle of the central Islamic problem of freewill and pre-destination. Ghazali explains that in order to understand how it is possible to be both satisfied and discontented with a sin at the same time, one simply has to consider the case of the death of an enemy's enemy who also happens to be one's own enemy. In such a scenario, one would be pleased with the death of such a person, to the extent that he is one's own enemy and no longer poses a threat. At the same time, one would be troubled by the fact that an enemy has lost an enemy who might have otherwise weakened his force and caused him to divert his attention from oneself. Thus the death of such an enemy would be a reason for both pleasure and displeasure (Ghazali, 1998: vol. 5, 93).²⁹ The key is to realize, argues Ghazali, that the conflicting experiences of *rida* and *sakhat* have their origin in different perspectives of the same event. A similar line of reasoning would also be used within classical discussions to explain the existence of contradictory Divine Names, such as the Forgiver and the Avenger, or the Manifest and the Hidden.³⁰

Even though Makki does acknowledge that all acts have their origin in God, both the good and the evil, one of the main concerns of his chapter on *rida* is to highlight the responsibility that humans must take for sins when they are seen from the "human side." He is concerned in particular with the danger of becoming satisfied with acts which are regarded as blameworthy by religious laws and which are therefore detrimental to the soul. In so far as such sins are concerned, the human being is called to bracket out the divine origin of such acts and take full responsibility for them. This implies exertion, effort, and struggle to live as virtuously as possible.³¹ Makki's intention in his analysis of *rida* is therefore twofold: on the one hand, to protect the spiritual aspirant from becoming passive and noncommittal towards the demands of the Path, and on the other hand, to guard him from the much worse scenario of becoming pleased with acts that are transgressions against God out of a perverted sense of virtue. "As for the one from among the ignorant who says *rida* applies to his sins . . . just as it applies to his acts of disobedience," writes Makki, "such a one has made sins and acts of disobedience as a means of drawing close to God, and made them both equal. In this the laws brought by the prophets are destroyed" (1995: vol. 2, 95). Such a man is deluded and far in error. This is why Makki writes,

The people of certainty and the lovers of God do not give up enjoining the good and forbidding of the wrong. And they do not deny the rejecting of sins and detesting them both by the tongues and the hearts, because faith has made such acts binding . . . The station of certainty³² does not eliminate the obligations of faith, and witnessing divine unity³³ does not nullify the laws of the Messenger, nor does it relinquish the responsibilities of abiding by it (i.e. the Law). He who makes such a claim has slandered God and His Prophet . . . (1995: vol. 2, 90)

In so far as much of Makki's analysis of *rida* is focused on the "human side" of sins, he is emphatic that *rida* in and of itself is not a virtue. After all, as he notes, the Qur'an itself condemns those who "have *rida* with the life of the world, and find repose in it" (Q 10:7). Conversely, dissatisfaction in itself is not a vice. To be dissatisfied with one's spiritual state is a necessary component of spiritual growth, because without it, one lacks

the impulse to draw closer to God and realize one's full potential as a human being.³⁴ One must therefore only have *rida* with what God Himself has *rida* with, and realize, as the Qur'an makes clear, that God does not have *rida* with everything. One should, however, strive to have *rida* with one's worldly circumstances in life, particularly its trials and tribulations, such as the onslaught of disease, death of loved ones, and loss of property. This is because such sources of suffering can be of extreme benefit for one's spiritual growth and pave the way for one's ultimate salvation (1995: vol. 2, 91). This is why Makki calls the afflictions of this world "adornments of the next world" for those who desire God. But *rida* with such matters should not carry over into one's spiritual life; otherwise one can become lackadaisical in spiritual matters, or worse, pleased with those very things that draw the wrath of God. Makki goes so far as to declare that *rida* with such sins is worse than the sins themselves (1995: vol. 2, 91). Makki also states that *rida* with the divine decree should not prevent one who has been given a great degree of wealth and worldly luxury from abandoning it for a modest life, even one of poverty, on the grounds that do so would be to go against the will of God. Such a course of action may well reflect nothing more than a hidden desire for the fleeting pleasures of this life. "*Rida* does not prevent one," writes Makki, "from choosing (a life of) poverty and destitution because of the *radiyy*'s [satisfied one's] knowledge of the eminence of renunciation" (1995: vol. 2, 91).

There is a final point of observation that should be made regarding Makki's views of *rida*. Although he is very clear about the need to take ownership of one's sins and acts of transgression, he is also adamant about the need to continually retrace one's good deeds to their divine origin. The reason for this is to enable the spiritual seeker to comport himself with courtesy before God. This courtesy requires of him that he take responsibility for his wrongdoing but acknowledge the divine origin of his good actions. This is why Makki states,

It is out of beautiful courtesy with God in matters of religious act, that if you do a good deed, you say, "My Master, you granted me the ability (to do such a deed), and it was by your power and might, and success granted by you that I obeyed you. This is because my limbs are your soldiers. And if I did something through which I wronged myself, it was through my caprice and passion that my limbs transgressed, and those are my attributes." (1995: vol. 2, 95–96)

Such a course of action is essential not just to maintain courtesy before God, but also to internalize a sense of humility and protect oneself from the corrosive qualities of spiritual pride and hubris. But "it is difficult," acknowledges Makki, "for the ignorant one to be cognizant of this (reality)." This is because "if he performs a good deed he witnesses himself and observes his own power and ability. He is destroyed by pride and his act is nullified by conceit. And if he performs a reprehensible deed, he does not (fully) acknowledge the sin nor confess his own iniquity" (1995: vol. 2, 95–96).

As philosophically counterintuitive as Makki's stance may appear on the question of taking ownership only of one's wrongdoings, it must be kept in mind that his objective in the *Nourishment* is not to provide a rigorously coherent view of human agency and sinfulness, but to provide the spiritual seeker with a perspective, rooted in Scripture and

tradition, which will enable her to realize the fullest potential of her soul and return to God in a state of felicity. Since this is only possible as long as she remains free of pride and spiritual hubris, Makki requires her to take ownership of only her acts of transgression, so that she remains displeased with her own state, and yet pleased with all that comes to her from God. By psychologically internalizing such an attitude towards her own shortcomings, she will be able to open herself to the ultimate *rida* of God.

Conclusion

We saw at the opening of this article how *rida* was defined as one of the central virtues in early Sufism because it signified a state of serene and even joyous acquiescence to divine will, a logical extension, in many respects, of the act of surrender which lies at the heart of Islam. To this end, it was shown that early Sufi authors encouraged people to remain free from feelings of bitterness, discontentment, and dejectedness no matter how taxing or trying they found their life circumstances to be. This did not, however, prevent at least some of our authors, such as Makki, from allowing one to speak of one's misfortunes to others, to even share one's own grief, provided one's intention was not to raise a complaint against God or express frustration with the will of heaven. In the ultimate order of things, it was argued, everything was as it was meant to be. This belief would lead Ghazali to later assert that "there is nothing in the realm of possibility more splendid than what already is." *Rida* could not but be the natural response to a creative will which kept the cosmos in balance. It was also shown that as a virtue, *rida* was understood to be an embodiment of one's love of God, since the lover, as Rabi'a would so boldly claim, would be pleased with whatever came her way from the Beloved. When everything is seen as a gift from the divine Beloved, then, or so the early Sufis argued, one can only respond to life with contentment and pleasure. This particular attitude as it was advocated in the early texts, however, was not without its own internal contradictions and tensions. After all, did this mean that one had to be satisfied with absolutely everything, including one's own moral and spiritual failings, as well as the injustices of the world? Neither the Qur'an nor the prophetic traditions, around which early Sufi meditations revolved, advocated such an attitude. Yet these same principal religious sources also seemed to encourage satisfaction with God's decree, and displeasure with moral and spiritual vices, injustice, and oppression. How was this dilemma to be resolved? It was left up to later writers such as Ghazali to adjudicate such tensions and produce a logically coherent vision of sin and human agency. The early writers, however, were content simply to note the paradox without delving into it. Since their primary concern was *praxis*, they were satisfied simply to provide a method to which the seeker could submit, in order to attain the ultimate goal of the Sufi path: inner purification and the proximity of God. The broader theoretical questions that these issues presented would be explored in greater detail by later generations.

Notes

1. For remarks on the role that the inner custom or *sunna* of the founder of Islam plays in Sufism, see Geoffroy (2010: 47–48).

2. While classical Sufi writers typically authored texts with a male audience in mind, they also would have had female readers, judging by the role women have historically played within the Sufi tradition. It is only reasonable to assume, therefore, that the general use of masculine pronouns within medieval Sufi texts did not exclude women. This becomes particularly clear when we consider that the very same kind of language was used by women in their own sayings, in a clearly gender-neutral sense. See, for example, Sulami's (d. 1021) hagiographical account of early Sufi women, in which he collected many of their sayings (1999). For some insightful scholarly treatments of women in Sufism, see Chishti (1987), Chodkiewicz (1994), Dakake (2006), Schimmel (1997), Shaikh (2012), and Silvers (2010). Murata's *Tao of Islam* (1992) remains the most thorough study of the cosmology and ontology of the feminine in Sufism and the broader Islamic "sapiential" tradition to date. Helminski's *Women of Sufism* (2003), though less academic, is still useful and an engaging read. Dakake and Silvers are currently working on separate monographs on women in Sufism which, when complete, will be welcome additions to the study of the role of gender within the tradition.
3. For an excellent overview of the formative period of Sufism, see Karamustafa's recent study (2007).
4. I follow here the periodization introduced by Michael Sells (1996: 18).
5. *surur al-qalb bi marr al-qada'*. Cf. Hujwiri (1992: 180). Qushayri attributes the saying to Nuri, with a slightly modified version of it attributed to Muhasibi (Qushayri, 2002a: 362). The saying is also attributed to Dhu al-Nun by Sarraj in his *Kitab al-luma'* (2001: 50; cf. Suhrawardi, 2005: 481). For my translations of Qushayri's *Risala* I have liberally consulted those of Rabia Harris (Qushayri, 2002b) and Barbara von Schlegel (Qushayri, 1990).
6. Also vowelled *sakht* and *sukhut*.
7. Cf. Qur'an 85:16.
8. The oppositional relation between the verbal roots of *rida* and *sakht*, namely r-d-y and s-kh-t, is so pronounced in the Qur'an that in three of its four occurrences, s-kh-t appears as the immediate opposite of r-d-y (Q 3:162; 9:58; 47:28). The Qur'an states, for example, that "they followed that which angered (*sakhata*) God and detested His good-pleasure (*ridwan*)"; and on another occasion, "they are pleased (*radu*) if they are given a share [of alms], but angry (*yaskhatun*) if they are not" (Q 47:28; 9:58).
9. Muhasibi is believed to have explored this topic in greater detail in a work entitled *The Book of Patience and Rida*. However, only a small fragment of the book remains (Picken, 2011: 87).
10. It is used in the Qur'an in reference to God in 39 instances and in reference to the human being in the remaining 34. The subject of r-d-y is in some cases a matter of exegetical debate.
11. But as Ibn al-'Arabi would later observe, the divine commands one must observe to obtain His *rida* are light, because, as the Qur'an states, "God desires for you ease" (1999: vol. 7, 365–366).
12. A view attributed to Muhammad b. Khafif (Qushayri, 2002a: 360).
13. For an excellent analysis of such commonly employed tripartite divisions in Sufi literature, see Jonathan Brown (2006: 97–104).
14. Muhasibi draws a similar distinction. Patience, he says, is required of all believers, but *rida* is an eminent state. The latter stands at the level of grace, favor, or eminence (*fadl*), as opposed to patience, which because it stands at the level of "justice" (*'adl*) is binding and therefore necessary (Massignon, 1997: 169).

15. Such an individual reaches, according to Hujwiri, such a degree of self-transcendence that he is no longer qualified even by the quality of *rida*, since to experience *rida* is to be confined by it. It is such a state of being that Kalabadhi seems to have in mind when he asserts that “one should be separated in those states from those very states, and so not realize any state at all, being entirely absorbed in the vision of Him who appoints the states” (1935: 105).
16. It is not always clear which level a particular person may be describing his experience of *rida* from. Is such a state due to annihilation in the Godhead or, at a more preliminary level, an acquiescence to divine will?
17. See Sara Svri’s brief remarks on this question (2002: 197), as well as the editorial introduction.
18. Note also the saying of Amina, the sister of Abu Sulayman al-Darani, in which she ties together the two virtues: “the Sufis are all dead, except for the one whom God revives through the glory of *qana’ a* and *rida* in his poverty” (Sulami, 1999: 194–195).
19. This would be an insufficient explanation, however, because these same texts will devote separate chapters to abstinence and patience, for example.
20. Literally, “I have plenty of dinars.”
21. The particular references are too numerous to cite, and permeate his entire analysis.
22. For some brief remarks on the significance of God’s *lutf/altaf*, also translated as “assistance,” in *kalam* literature, see Blankinship (2008: 47, 50) and Rizvi (2008: 94).
23. I consciously avoid using the term “anthropomorphism” to steer clear of certain potentially misleading connotations of the term within the present context. Nowhere does Makki suggest a corporeal likeness between God and the human being.
24. *a’rafakum bi rabbihi a’rafakum bi nafsihi*. This a variant of the saying, often attributed to the Prophet but whose authenticity remains contested by the classical hadith specialists, that “he who knows himself knows His Lord” (*man ‘arafa nafasahu faqad ‘arafa rabbahu*). For some brief observations on the use of this tradition within Sufi literature, particularly in the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabi, see Chittick (1989: 344–346, 396 n. 20, 437).
25. There may be a word play here around the root kh-l-q: one learns how to properly comport oneself (*khuluq*) with the Creator (*khaliq*) through one’s interactions with God’s creation (*khalq*).
26. To give another example, in his chapter on *tawba* (“repentance” or “re/turning”), he cites the words of Sahl al-Tustari, his teacher, who famously declared that genuine *tawba* entails never forgetting one’s sins. While he acknowledges the merit of this approach, he qualifies it by noting that in certain circumstances such a course of action can be counter-productive, particularly when recalling a certain sin may serve only to rekindle the passion which led to it in the first place. Whether or not the novice should recall the memory of the sin depends therefore on the effect of such recollection. The act of remembering is only helpful when it leads to a greater sense of regret and humility and intensifies one’s resolve to avoid relapse (Makki, 1995: vol. 1, 368).
27. *yarda bihi ‘an Allah wa la yarda bihi min nafsihi*.
28. For the influence of Makki’s *Qut* on Ghazali’s *Ihya’*, see Lazarus-Yafeh (1975: 34–35), Nakamura (1984: 83–91), and Sherif (1975: 105–107).
29. Although his more strictly theological works go into such questions in greater detail, since the *Ihya* is not primarily a *kalam* text.
30. This issue is broached, for example, by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya in his treatise on the divine names, *Asma’ Allah al-husna* (2003).

31. Tor Andrae astutely notes that for the Sufis, *rida* is far from a “submissive resignation” to divine decree (1987: 115).
32. *maqam al-yaqin*. This is a commonly used term in the *Nourishment* to indicate an elevated level of faith. Makki also refers to the Sufi “stations” as the “stations of certainty.”
33. *mushahadat al-tawhid*. This makes it clear, according to Makki, that witnessing divine agency within human agency does not absolve one of the need to take responsibility for the latter.
34. This would be so crucial a point that Ibn al-‘Arabi would two centuries later devote an entire chapter in his encyclopedic *Meccan Revelations*, appropriately entitled “abandoning *rida*” (*tark al-rida*), to the very danger of becoming content with one’s knowledge of God and of the spiritual state.

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