

Chapter 13

What Muslim Scholars Talk About When They Talk About Love



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Abstract The theme of love has been marginal to the study of Islam; to the extent that it is discussed, it is almost exclusively associated with Sufism. In contrast, scholars often assume that love is a concern alien to Islamic legal discourses. However, the composition of love poetry has been a core cultural competence of elite Muslims throughout the premodern history of Islamicate societies. In fact, love was a preoccupation across disciplines and genres. This article examines a work on love by an important if controversial fourteenth-century jurist, Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīya. Ibn Taymīya associates love with obedience to God and with solidarity among the believers. He depicts love as cognitively based; while human beings are naturally inclined to various forms of infatuation, love can be redirected to its proper objects (primarily God, the Prophet Muhammad, and other believers) through correct religious instruction. While this understanding of love may seem to contrast with the more universalistic approach popularly associated with Sufism, it resonates with recent scholarship outside of Islamic studies that demonstrates the role of love in sustaining boundaries and hierarchy.

Introduction: Love in Islam (and in Islamic Studies)

In 1999, the popular Salafi website Islam Q&A¹ published an earnest inquiry from a group of anonymous Muslims:

¹On this website see Bunt (2003, pp. 138–142).

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We are a group of Muslims who have been having a discussion in which we tried to reach a definition of “love” in Islam. Despite the fact that we all completely recognize the necessity of loving God Most High and have committed ourselves to loving Him, His prophets and His messengers, we are wondering if there is a clear framework for love among human beings (like “brotherly love” in Christianity, not the romantic kind). Some say that love exists only in the context of the family, and that everything else is only respect, friendship, and the like. Some wonder whether love is limited to one’s spouse and children. Others wonder if love can be subject to conditions or not. Another opinion says that “love” (according to the common expression) is nothing but an “innovation” based on fictional stories and Christian philosophy. Many of us have researched various sources to reach an answer, but until now we haven’t reached a decisive answer. Can you help us?²

This query suggests that even some modern Muslim believers may reflexively associate the theme of love first and foremost with Christianity rather than with their own tradition. The same is true on the level of external perceptions, and even of scholarly study; as William Chittick observes in a recent book on the subject, “few people associate love with Islam” (Chittick 2013, p. xi). Chittick notes, however, that there is in fact copious evidence of centuries of engagement with the theme of love by a wide range of Muslim thinkers (Chittick 2013, p. xii).³ The Salafi movement represented by the website cited above may be the stream of modern Islam least associated in the popular mind with love as a religious emotion. Nevertheless, far from lacking thoughts on the subject, the website’s founder Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid is able to offer a comprehensive answer establishing a taxonomy of different forms of love and their status within Islam. Although we cannot know the identity of the enquirers, their touching uncertainty about the very existence of Islamic thinking on interpersonal love must thus reflect their own lack of formal religious learning rather than any lack of relevant materials from the Islamic tradition.

To the extent that love is thematized in the secondary literature on Islam, it is overwhelmingly associated with Sufism. Both Chittick and another distinguished U.S. scholar, Omid Safi, have recently produced works on the theme of love in Islam focusing primarily on Sufis (see Safi 2018); conversely, much of the general secondary literature on Sufism highlights love as a central concept. Indeed, in the secondary Islamic studies literature love is often seen as antithetical to the priorities of Islamic legal thought (*fiqh*) and of the ‘ulama’ who pursued it as a central component of their training. Chittick writes in this regard, “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” (Chittick 2014, p. 230). In his posthumous work *What Is Islam?* Shahab Ahmed argues that the “School of Love” (*madhhab-i ‘ishq*) reflected in the Persian poetry of mystical love

² <https://islamqa.info/ar/276> (translation mine); English version <https://islamqa.info/en/276>. Accessed 13 June 2018.

³ ...Muslim poets lived in a vibrant culture. They were familiar with an extensive Arabic literature in many fields of learning, a good portion of which talked about love” (Chittick 2013, p. xii).

should in fact be placed at the center of our understanding of the Islam of what he terms the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” in the period stretching from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries C.E. (Ahmed 2016, pp. 38–46). He frames this “School of Love” in direct contrast with the legal schools that are the more common denotation of the word “*madhhab*” (Ahmed 2016, p. 44). Overall, the prevailing assumption is that the salience of love in Sufism contrasts with its marginality or irrelevance to the discipline of Islamic law.

This assumption has not gone completely unchallenged. Tahseen Thaver asks in response to Ahmed’s comments, “But is love the sole prerogative of the *madhhab-i ‘ishq*? More specifically, what forms and notions of love operated in the legal tradition?... Is it not possible to discern love in law?” (Thaver 2016). Some recent work has also shed light on the apparent tensions between the content of Arabic love poetry and the legal doctrines of the scholars who surprisingly often composed it; Khaled El-Rouayheb has done this masterfully in a study of homoerotic verse (see El-Rouayheb 2005). Such work demonstrates that there is no simple dichotomy between a profane culture that celebrates love poetry and a legal tradition that condemns or ignores it.⁴ There has also been occasional attention to the theme of love of the Prophet Muḥammad as a legal duty.⁵ However, there has so far been little attention to significance of love (or indeed, of emotion in general) to the overall legal project. What are the emotions that are understood to condition and motivate adherence to and enforcement of the Sharī‘a, and how does love figure among them? Rather than seeing legal scholars as dour foils to the lovesick Sufis, or law as the “dry” complement to emotionally rich mystical pursuits, it is appropriate to ask how jurists envisioned emotions in general—and love in particular—to relate to the law.

The need to revisit received ideas about love in Islamic thought is underlined by recent developments in the broader scholarship on the history of emotions. In the past, Islamicists may have associated love with Sufism in part because they tacitly shared a normative view of love as a benevolent emotion associated with personal longing and devotion. Even in the context of Sufism, it was often not placed in the context of structural or institutional factors. This approach contrasts with recent developments in other fields, where scholars of emotion have explored the many ideological functions of love. As Sara Ahmed has observed, “of all the emotions, love has been theorised as crucial to the social bond. More specifically, love has been theorised as central to politics and the securing of social hierarchy” (Ahmed 2014, p. 142, n.5). This broad insight has given rise to a body of scholarship that recognizes love’s role in creating exclusion as well as belonging and power as well as equality. For instance, Claudia Jarzebowski has described how among late medieval and early modern Christians the concept of divine love was used to legitimate

⁴This view contrasts with Thomas Bauer’s assertion that Arabic love poetry demonstrates “it is indeed possible to distinguish between a secular and a religious sphere in Islamic societies, [spheres] that stand in a tension-laden relationship to each other without being mutually exclusive” (Bauer 1998, p. 6; translation mine). It may well be that there were varying degrees of integration and synthesis between the two across time, place and milieu.

⁵See, for instance, Katz (2007, pp. 117–125) and Ukeles (2010, pp. 319–337).

disciplinary action by rulers against their subjects, including the suppression of the Peasants' War in the early sixteenth century (Jarzebowski 2014, p. 168). Katie Barclay notes that in premodern Christian Europe “[s]ubordinates demonstrated their love through their acceptance of their social position,” and that “[m]aintaining a watchful eye on neighbours and reporting them for discipline to Church authorities when they sinned... was a loving action,” an expression of *caritas* as God’s love manifested in the world (Barclay 2019, p. 80, 81).⁶ Indeed, Eva Österberg argues that it was only in the eighteenth century that love was assigned to the newly distinct private sphere and decisively separated from the ethical and political concerns historically associated with friendship (Österberg 2010, ch. 2, pp. 23–89). Before this time, many European thinkers shared Aristotle’s assumption that love and friendship were manifestations of the same larger phenomenon, one with profound ethical, social and political implications.⁷

Although relevant comments remain scattered and love has yet to emerge as a central theme within the field, Islamic studies scholars as well have begun to address the complex ways in which love is intertwined with hierarchy and power in various historical manifestations of Islamic thought. Writing about works of Islamic philosophical ethics (*akhlāq*) of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, Zahra Ayubi argues that “[i]n the ethics texts, the fundamental principle underlying homosocial association is that of love” (Ayubi 2019, p. 179). Within this context, “the ethicists’ hierarchical model of love ... functions as a mechanism of exclusion, ranking male love, which is spiritual and cerebral, above female love, which is physical and bodily” (Ayubi 2019, pp. 180–181). Even within the study of Sufism, some recent scholarship no longer treats love as an ethereal entity inherently at odds with the elements of structure and authority more conventionally associated with the law. In a study focusing on Iranian and Central Asian Sufi texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth century, Shahzad Bashir observes that in their narratives of Sufi initiation and training,

human relationships described in terms of love produce obligations and expectations that are open to manipulation by those involved. The modulation of love relationships is intimately tied not only to affection but also to domination, submission, and control; concentrating on the way such relationships are represented in the sources provides a sense of the way power operated in a social milieu conditioned by Sufi ideas and practice (Bashir 2011, p. 108).

In a similar vein, Youshaa Patel demonstrates that for the seventeenth-century Syrian Sufi and biographer Najm al-Din al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), love gave rise to the emulation of beloved others and thus to “social belonging.” Such love and emulation have salutary results when their objects are God, His prophets, and the Sufi saints, and dire implications when they are non-believers (Patel 2012, pp. 263–271). Patel concludes that “for Ghazzī, ultimately it was love, above all, that framed alterity, how an individual truly became ‘one of them’” (Patel 2012, p. 228).

⁶I thank Prof. Barclay for making this paper available to me.

⁷*Mahabba*, Ibn Taymīya’s term for love in this work, is the word used to translate *philia* in the Arabic version of the Nicomachean Ethics. See Akasoy and Fidor (2005, p. 611). In Ibn Taymīya’s work, it can encompass both *philia* and *eros*.

The Many Locations of Love in Islamic Thought

If love is not simply to be celebrated (or dismissed) as an ideal phenomenon hovering above the socio-political realm of loyalty and dominance, where can we find it in Islamic thought—and how have ideas about love been intertwined with the structures of Islamic societies and their religious disciplines? A wide range of scholarship has contributed to a composite picture of the many ways in which ideas about love historically shaped and were shaped by the Muslim community, its institutions and beliefs. Focusing on the Qur'an and on early narratives of conversion, Karen Bauer shows how “practices of emotional expression and control were portrayed as an aspect of the political, social and spiritual revolution that was the coming of Islam” (Bauer 2019, p. 139). This process included a realignment of emotional attachment—that is, of love—away from unbelieving kin and toward God, the Prophet, and the faith community. Focusing on the piety of frontier warriors in early Islamic Syria, Josef van Ess hypothesizes that ḥadīth in which the Prophet praises those “who love each other for the sake of God” may have first circulated in these circles, expressing the idealized solidarity of their shared struggle on behalf of the faith. Speculatively but provocatively, he suggests that jihād rather than mysticism may have been a locus for some of the earliest reflection on pious love (Ess and Josef 2001, pp. 264–265).

Our richest source for motifs of love from the earliest stages of Islamic history is poetry, and studies suggest the rich ways in which its genesis is intertwined with Islam as a belief system and with the socio-political evolution of the Muslim community. Thomas Bauer argues that the rise of Arabic love poetry reflects the social and ideological developments surrounding the rise of Islam. Although the pre-Islamic Arabic ode (*qaṣīda*) conventionally opens with an erotic prelude in which the poet ruminates on the abandoned campground of his mistress, Bauer argues that its focus is on bygone erotic enjoyment, not on personal attachment. The departed woman's beauty reflects the masculine prowess of the poet, whose conquests (like his poetic virtuosity) contribute to his image as an incarnation of tribal values. Bauer argues that the erosion of the tribal system and the rise of social mobility in the new metropolises of the early Islamic empire produced a new sense of individuality, enabling the emergence of a new vision of love as an expression of personal affinity and desire. On an ideological level, these tendencies were intensified by the egalitarianism of an Islamic worldview in which individuals were distinguished by their personal attributes rather than by inherited status (see Bauer 1998, pp. 22–106).

A related set of arguments about the genesis and *Sitz im Leben* of love poetry in the early Islamic period is presented by Algazi (2001).⁸ Pointing to the early 'Abbasid period as the context in which much of what was later regarded as “classical Islamic culture” originated (Algazi 2001, p. 188), he describes passionate love as a central motif in the literary depiction powerful men at the caliphal court (Algazi 2001, p. 189). Although this love sometimes led to displays of distraught behavior,

⁸The paper reports on research conducted with the late Rina Drory.

Algazi argues that in fact it was a civilizing and enculturating process: “To court was to become courtly. The man who is in love was expected to acquire an entire cultural repertoire: be able to cite classical texts, compose poems, write letters, and observe an exacting code of cleanliness and bodily care” (Algazi 2001, p. 190; translation mine). By offering a motivation and a model for the assimilation of courtly mores, he maintains, this ethos of love contributed to a kind of solidarity that could be supplied neither by the ‘Abbasid elites’ diverse ethnic backgrounds nor by their contentious theological convictions (Algazi 2001, p. 193).

Although the courtly love described by Algazi may seem to be linked to Islam only by its genesis in the caliphal court, Maurice Pomerantz suggests how the early ‘Abbasid conventions and terminology of love were drawn into discussions of faith and morality. He shows how the non-Qur’anic term *‘ishq* (passionate love), brought to prominence by the courtly poets of the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid periods, is theorized by al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869). He notes,

For al-Jāhīz the power of *‘ishq* ought to be harnessed to the procreative ends of life.... In short, it seems that al-Jāhīz was elaborating for the Abbasid court, a kind of relationship between men and women that was similar in effects from that designed by the jurists beyond it....[A]l-Jāhīz’s notion of the relation of *‘ishq* and *ḥubb* [was] intended to restore or correct what he (and perhaps many others) at the Abbasid court, saw was the corrupting effects of desire on rationality and order (Pomerantz 2018, p. 12).

Undoubtedly the most vital development for Islamic conceptions of love was the Sufi adoption of *‘ishq* as a term for immoderate and all-consuming love of the divine. Nevertheless, as Dick Davis has discussed, the terminology and motifs associated with love of God remained deeply intertwined with the language of human patronage and power. In the tenth and eleventh century, New Persian emerged as a vehicle of poetic expression in the courts of regional rulers in Iran and Central Asia. This was also the time and place that saw the emergence and canonization of what would become classical Sufism. Davis describes how the following several centuries saw “the colonization of ... Persian poetry by the tenets and tropes of Sufism,” while, conversely, “the practice and traditions of poetry began ... to shape the ways in which Sufism was discussed” (Davis 1999, p. 279, 280). Within this mutually constitutive development of Sufism and poetry, motifs of passionate love played the central role. Davis argues that the “language of extravagant praise, longing and compliment” that is the stock in trade of this poetry originated in early New Persian court panegyrics, but was eventually applied to a much broader range of contexts including “erotic love, friendship, worship of God, [and] relations within the family.” Ultimately, “The rhetoric of panegyric ... was reinforced rather than diluted by its adoption as the language of mystical verse” (Davis 1999, p. 282). The language of love thus remained deeply entwined with the language of political fealty.

The ongoing role of love in premodern Islamic political thought is demonstrated by Mona Hassan’s panoramic 2016 study of the religious meanings of the institution of the caliphate. Describing the deep seriousness with which Muslim scholars continued to treat the caliphate after the fall of the Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258, she shows that for the influential scholar Jalal al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 1505), “granting the ‘Abbasid caliphate its full due was above all a matter of love and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad” (Hassan 2016, pp. 138–139).

The language and conventions of love could also be major media for the articulation of interpersonal and professional ties among religious scholars. Focusing on the eighteenth-century scholar and Sufi Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791)'s extensive account of his multifarious personal contacts, Stefan Reichmuth notes that *maḥabba* (love) has

a strong Sufi colouring, especially in the context of the Naqṣbandiyya where they indicate the initial stage of the emotional and moral attachment of a disciple to his master.... But *ḥubb* also occurs in relations without any recognizable Sufi connotation, e.g. in the context of teaching, literature and philology where it is best understood as a bond of general loyalty and followership. (Reichmuth 2009, p. 210)

According to Reichmuth, Zabīdī's pervasive invocation of love for those with whom he shared scholarly and religious ties constitutes a "discourse of friendship" that may have helped to cement his era's "expanding world of migrant scholars and students who had to establish themselves in places far away from their families and their home communities" (Reichmuth 2009, p. 221). His pursuit of relationships of pious love not only contributed to his construction of a far-flung network of contacts with contemporaries but helped motivate his work as a religious scholar.

Cumulatively, recent scholarship suggests that while pious love in its various forms may indeed have been sincerely felt, on an ideological level it has also been a major idiom for the articulation of interpersonal ties on both the private and the political level (and at many places on the spectrum between the two). Crucially, such ties could be articulated in terms of love even—or perhaps especially—when they were hierarchical in nature. As Ayesha Hidayatullah has observed, "Classical and premodern views of love and sexuality exhibited a range of attitudes on the relationship between mutuality and hierarchy, including ones that saw possession, passivity, and submission as natural to loving relationships" (Hidayatullah 2014, p. 165). It was this element of hierarchy that, in many cases, created a parallel between human interpersonal bonds and the relationship between humans and God. As we shall see, this parallel offered rich interpretive possibilities for legal thinkers.

Ibn Taymīya's *Qā'ida fī al-maḥabba*

The remainder of this paper will focus on one example of Islamic religious literature on love and law. The thinker whose work I will examine is Ibn Taymīya, a Syrian scholar who died in 1328 CE and whose staunch opposition to religious practices diverging from his understanding of the sunna (including those of many Sufis) brought him into sharp conflict with the religious establishment of his day. I have intentionally chosen a work representing the trend in Islamic thought and practice perhaps least associated in the popular mind with the cultivation of tender emotions.⁹ Ibn Taymīya is retrospectively regarded as a historical predecessor of the modern Salafī movement represented by the website Islam Q&A, cited at the opening of this paper. This movement emphasizes rigorous adherence to the doctrine and

⁹Notable exceptions are Bell (1979) and Ukeles (2010).

practice of the Prophet Muḥammad and the earliest Muslims, as reflected in the revealed texts of the Qur'an and the ḥadīth.¹⁰

Ibn Taymīya's works reflect the context of the Mamluk empire (which lasted from 1250 to 1516 and comprised Egypt and Greater Syria), an environment that was doubly saturated with the motifs and conventions of passionate love: firstly as a milieu in which the composition of love poetry was a basic cultural competence,¹¹ and secondly as a religious culture pervaded by Sufism (regardless of the individual scholar's relationship to Sufi practices or institutions). Despite Ibn Taymīya's profound disapproval for the means by which many of his contemporaries cultivated and expressed their love for God and the Prophet, such as ecstatic Sufi dancing and pilgrimage to the site of the Prophet's grave, he nevertheless accorded great importance to love as a religious emotion. As Joseph Norment Bell as noted, "Love is far from an isolated or minor topic in the system of Ibn Taymīya" (Bell 1979, p. 47).¹² However, little attention has been directed thus far to his discussion of love among human beings, rather than specifically towards God or the Prophet Muḥammad. This paper will examine his free-standing work *Qā'ida fī'l-maḥabba*, "Fundamentals Regarding Love," a small monograph filling a little over 200 pages in a modern edition (Ibn Taymīya, n.d.).

The premise with which Ibn Taymīya opens his discussion is that love (*maḥabba*) is the source of every act and motion in the world. He holds this to be true of the motions of all beings, both animate and inanimate; those that are not subject to the will of humans, jinn or animals (such as the movements of winds or of heavenly bodies) are in fact the actions of angels, whose driving force is the love of God. Conversely, all instances of inaction or refraining (*tark*) are rooted in dislike or hatred (*bughḍ*, *karāhīya*) (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 7, 16, 22).

Furthermore, a knowing living being will not willingly choose to love what harms it. Rather, beings inherently love that which benefits them, and what benefits them is identical to what gives them pleasure or enjoyment. Unsurprisingly, however, in Ibn Taymīya's theocentric system the ultimate source of all pleasure and thus of all benefit is God. He continues,

If love and desire are the source of every act and motion, and the greatest of them in truth are the love and desire for God through the worship of Him alone and without partner, and the most false of them is for people to take rivals along with God whom they love as they love God, and for them to make peers and partners for Him—[then] it is known that love and desire are the source of every religion (*dīn*),¹³ regardless of whether it is a valid or an

¹⁰For a discussion of the origins and nature of Salafism see Lauzière (2016).

¹¹See, for instance, Bauer (2005, pp. 35–55).

¹²Now see also Hoover (2019, pp. 45–48).

¹³*Dīn* (translated here as "religion") should be taken to mean "divinely mandated way of life." Patrice Brodeur notes that while "[p]rior to the twentieth century, the English word 'religion' had no direct equivalent in Arabic nor had the Arabic word *dīn* in English," by the late Meccan period the Qur'anic term *dīn* designates "collective commitment to live up to God's 'straight path' and thus 'means 'religion' both in the sense of a prescribed set of behaviors as well as a specific community..." (Brodeur 2005).

invalid religion. Religion consists of interior and exterior acts, and love and desire are the source of all of those... (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 31).

Given the close nexus Ibn Taymīya establishes among between love, benefit, and enjoyment, this account of religion might appear utilitarian and self-interested. However, his premise throughout is that people are extremely poor at discerning their own best interests; their loves and hates, and thus the motivations for their actions, are chronically subject to corruption and delusion—as he puts it, “Many people err about much of that” (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 70). For one thing, short-term and egoistic motivations may obscure a person’s ultimate better interests. Ibn Taymīya notes that “Your love of something blinds and deafens you; the human being is inherently disposed to love himself, so he sees only his own virtues, and to hate his rival, so that he sees only his faults” (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 142). The pervasive faultiness of human feeling and judgment in this regard applies even (or perhaps especially) of those who are deeply involved in the pursuit of righteousness and truth. Ibn Taymīya observes,

The only reason that these people intended to do the things that they did that deviated from obedience to God and His Prophet to the obedience of idols (*al-tāghūt*) was that they [falsely] imagined that [these things] would yield benefit for them... such as seeking knowledge and insight, as may occur among theologians, or such as seeking spiritual experiences and ecstasies, as may occur among mystics... (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 188).

People such as holy fools and Sufis may have great love along with faulty belief; in such cases, they are praiseworthy (and thus presumably religiously meritorious) for the love that they have for God, but blameworthy for any actions they perform that are not in adherence to the law of God and His Prophet (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 59).

Consistently with his overall view of epistemology, Ibn Taymīya thus emphasizes the need to resort to divine guidance—and specifically to God’s commands and prohibitions articulated in the Qur’an and the ḥadīth—in order to correctly orient the likes and dislikes that motivate one’s actions. He writes,

The love of God entails love of the obligations that He loves, as God Most High said: “Say: ‘If you love God, Follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins...’ [Qur’an 3:31]. Thus, following [the commands of] the Prophet is one of the greatest obligations that God placed upon His servants and loved; God does not dislike anything as much as [He dislikes] the one who does not follow [the commands of] His Prophet (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 72).

To love (and thus perform) the acts loved (and thus commanded) by God, and to hate and avoid those He has prohibited, is thus the necessary stance of the true believer. To feel dislike or resentment of God’s commands is itself religiously forbidden, and to love them is obligatory (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 193). Furthermore, there is a feedback loop between love and obedience; Ibn Taymīya declares that “sins diminish the love of God,” although sincere and well-established love of God and the Prophet will never be extirpated completely (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 72).

Thus far, Ibn Taymīya’s arguments have established an intimate association between love and law on the individual level. Love, at least as correctly understood, is a theocentric emotion that relates most centrally to a single human being, the Prophet through whom divine preferences have been revealed to humankind.

However, a large part of Ibn Taymīya's analysis is devoted to the implications of these postulates for inter-personal love and hate.

Firstly, an important element of God's law involves love and affiliation with those whom God loves and enmity and disaffiliation from those whom God hates. As Ibn Taymīya sums up this overall point in a different work,

What is obligatory on every Muslim is for his love and hate, his friendship and his enmity, to be in adherence to the command of God and His Prophet, so that he loves what God and His Prophet love and hates what God and His Prophet hate, is a friend to the one whom God and His Prophet befriend and is an enemy to the one whom God and His Prophet hold in enmity ... (Ibn Taymīya, 1421/2000, p. 49).

If the necessary expression of the love of God is to conform one's own feelings to God's loves and hates, the somewhat paradoxical result is that engaging in jihād is a direct corollary of the love of God (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., pp. 89–90, 93). While jihād need not be understood in a strictly military sense, in the context of this of this particular work it cannot be understood as purely internal. It involves the struggle against external foes, and the most immediate context is the Muslim response to the Mongol invasions (in which Ibn Taymīya was directly involved at some peril to himself).

The social implications of Ibn Taymīya's arguments go beyond the simple binary of alliance to God's friends and disaffiliation from (or conflict with) His enemies. On a more complex level, to love (and thus pursue) the benefits that are loved (and thus commanded) by God inherently requires alliance and association among groups of people. Ibn Taymīya's arguments in this regard are a variation on the standard philosophical premise that human beings are social animals due to their inability to fulfill their needs as isolated individuals. However, he gives this argument an affective inflection by interpreting the necessary social cooperation in terms of shared loves and hates (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 35). This cooperation involves not simply the practical need to pursue and avoid the same things, but emergence of authoritative norms—in other words, a *dīn*, a religion or ethos (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 36).¹⁴ The objective of *dīn* is not simply to establish worldly justice, as the pseudo-philosophers claim; even the people of Noah, Nimrod, and Genghis Khan could do this (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 45). Rather, the social alliances and hierarchies that allow the harmonization of practical this-worldly aims also underlie the group's pursuit of its ultimate aims.

Much of the second half of the book comprises Ibn Taymīya's discussion and critique of different forms of human love and loyalty. Rather than simply emphasizing that certain kinds of love (such as adulterous sexual relationships) are forbidden by God, he analyzes them in terms of the expansive definition of love that he has developed earlier in the work. Like love of God, love of other human beings involves not simply a feeling of affection, but a broader alignment of preferences and interests. Thus, Ibn Taymīya argues forcefully that adultery is not a victimless crime

¹⁴ In this context Ibn Taymīya defines *dīn* as “habitual obedience that has become a moral disposition” (*al-dīn huwa al-ḥā'a al-mu'tāda allatī šārat khuluqan*, p. 37).

even if one disregards the plight of the cuckolded husband. (He does not discuss the interests of betrayed wives, presumably because in traditional interpretations of Islamic law a woman never has an absolute right to sexual exclusivity vis-à-vis her husband.) In this context he condemns the common belief that those who engage in sexual misbehavior harm only themselves—a remark that may offer some insight into the mores of ordinary medieval Syrian Muslims. On the contrary, Ibn Taymīya insists, love for a forbidden individual necessarily involves the desire to provide benefits, money and solidarity for that person; it thus affects the rightful entitlements of other parties (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., pp. 204–205). Furthermore, the same is true of all forms of illicit love, even of a non-sexual kind: “Love causes the cooperation and agreement of those who love each other, so the two of them will inevitably dislike and show enmity to anyone who dislikes that of them and opposes them in it” (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 209).

Ibn Taymīya does not simply analyze romantic love as an alliance involving shared interests as well as affection and lust, but conversely, he analyzes social and political alliances in terms of love. Because the love of God involves allowing God’s preferences to guide one’s loyalty and obedience, there is no place for human political alliances or authority that are not directly grounded in adherence to God’s law. Loyalties and solidarities that are not grounded in the divine law, and that needlessly divide the community of the faithful, are to be avoided. Believers should not be divided “for the sake of the things by which some people distinguish themselves from others, such as lineages and countries, and alliances around schools of legal thought, Sufi orders, spiritual paths (*al-masālik*), [special] friendships, and other things.” Ibn Taymīya’s vision is not of a completely egalitarian and undifferentiated Muslim community; rather, he argues that each person should be treated as he merits, based on the commands of God and the Prophet (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 133).

Ibn Taymīya also suggests that contemporaries used the model of familial love to articulate interpersonal relationships of very different kinds, including those that we might categorize as economic or political. At several points in *Qā’ida fī’l-maḥabba* he alludes to friendships formalized as “brotherhood” (*mu’ākhāt*) between two parties. Such a relationship, he states, may be contracted in the pursuit of numerous ends: for training in a craft or education in a learned discipline, for partnership in a given craft or trade, or for the care and upbringing of a child who is orphaned or separated from his parents (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 118). A tie of “brotherhood” could thus, in modern parlance, serve as the outward form of an apprenticeship, a commercial joint venture, or the placement of a foster child. Elsewhere he refers to agreements of “brotherhood” being used by kings, Sufi shaykhs, members of the young men’s clubs known as *futuwwa*, and rifle shooting clubs (*rumāt al-banādiq*) (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 124).¹⁵

Ibn Taymīya does not explain in this work exactly what such a pact of “brotherhood” entails, but elsewhere he responds to a legal inquiry describing in some detail

¹⁵ The reference here is specifically to groups devoted to hunting with firearms. For a contemporary discussion of the loyalty and customs of such groups, see Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī (1406/1986, pp. 125–133).

what might be involved. The unnamed questioner describes a mutual oath in which the two parties declare, “My possessions (*māl*) are your possessions, my blood is your blood, and my children are your children,” after which each of them drinks the other’s blood—one trusts, only a token amount (Ibn Taymīya, 1421/2000, p. 48). In addition to denying that any such agreement can supersede the kin ties and inheritance rules established by God, Ibn Taymīya responds by emphasizing that according to most religious scholars, the brotherhood of faith established by God and His Prophet should suffice for a believer (Ibn Taymīya, 1421/2000, p. 50). Ibn Taymīya’s own comments suggest that in Sufi circles such bonds sometimes had the practical function of creating fictive kinship ties between male spiritual directors and their female disciples, thus allowing them to meet without the constraints imposed on unrelated people of opposite sex (Ibn Taymīya, 1421/2000, p. 50; see also Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 110). Ibn Taymīya clearly assumes that such oaths did not, in fact, result in the radical reconfiguration of family or redistribution of wealth. Nevertheless, his attention to the myriad uses of fictive brotherhood suggests how the affection and loyalty associated with family and friendship may have been activated in different aspects of contemporary society, including economic and institutional life.

Is the love that Ibn Taymīya discusses in this work really an emotion (in the sense of being a visceral feeling), or is it better understood as a more bloodless sense of loyalty or common interest? Many of the various motivations, values and alignments that Ibn Taymīya discusses under the rubric of *maḥabba* would often seem to have a tenuous relationship to love understood as an affective state. In the end, however, it would seem that Ibn Taymīya does not separate the two, and at some points he makes explicit that the love he envisions is a passionate feeling as well as a rational perception of allegiance or shared interest. He remarks at one point that only love of God or of a human being can completely absorb the heart and lead someone to self-destruction (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., pp. 80–81), suggesting a feeling that is potentially all-consuming rather than merely calculating. He also observes in passing that “love has traces and consequences ...; it has ardor (*wajd*), sweetness, and taste (*dhawq*), unification and rejection; it has delight, sorrow, and weeping...” (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 16). The believer’s love of the divine law is also situated within a complex of potential emotions; Ibn Taymīya notes that if a true believer is tempted by desire to commit a forbidden action, that action must necessarily be accompanied by an element of distaste (*bughḍ*), as well as by fear of punishment and hope of forgiveness (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 104).

Throughout this work, Ibn Taymīya has far more to say about correct and incorrect forms of love than about the mechanisms by which proper love is inculcated. In his discussion of illicit sexual relationships he suggests that canonical punishments form part of a system of sanctions and incentives that re-orient sinners’ feelings as well as their behavior. A painful punishment is not simply a deterrent in the sense that prudent people will strive to avoid it, but also serves to create an aversion to the act it punishes. Similarly, the promise of a greater pleasure (such as heavenly bliss) can help to supplant the love for a lesser one (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 207). However, most of the discussion implicitly assumes that the problem of wrongful loves and

hates is largely one of incorrect or deficient knowledge, and particularly religious knowledge. Discussing the causes of people's misplaced love, Ibn Taymīya cites both ignorance and "incorrect belief" (*i'tiqād fāsīd*, i.e., doctrinal error or heresy) as prime contributors (along with *ẓulm*, or injustice) (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 16). The first line of defense, he states, is always to refer to the guidance of the Qur'an and ḥadīth; if still uncertain after consulting these sources, a qualified person may resort to *ijtihād*. (The *ijtihād* of the common people, he notes, is to seek knowledge from the 'ulama' by asking them questions and soliciting their legal opinions (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 132).) Ibn Taymīya does concede that love is not always dependent on knowledge; mystics may sometimes be mad, and heretics may love their creator (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., pp. 58–59). Rightful love, however, seems to be very much cognitively based, and Ibn Taymīya's primary response to misplaced love seems to be religious instruction.

Thus, he devotes a great deal of attention to the misguided doctrinal beliefs and specious textual interpretations by which people justify their illicit romantic attachments. He notes that "many ignorant Turks and others" cite verse 23:6 of the Qur'an, which limits the legitimate sexual contacts of faithful believers to "their spouses and that which their right hands possess," to justify sexual relationships with their male slaves (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 113).¹⁶ Ibn Taymīya states that he has also encountered at least one student of the Qur'an who believed that chapter 2:231 ("a believing slave is better [as a sexual partner] than a polytheist") includes male slaves (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 114). Others will claim that the prohibition of sexual relationships between males is a matter of juristic disagreement, either by misrepresenting the doctrine of a legal school that is not locally represented, or by interpreting the lack of agreement over the punishment for sodomy as a lack of agreement that it is forbidden at all. Ibn Taymīya states he has repeatedly heard notions of this kind from members of the Turkish military elite, Sufis, and ordinary people (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 114). In addition to making meretricious textual arguments, Ibn Taymīya reports that people valorize their illicit love relationships with members of the same sex by applying the same ethical standards that they use for their licit partnerships. Thus, people commonly praise the chastity of a man who is faithful to his male partner, just as they might praise a woman for fidelity to her husband (Ibn Taymīya, n.d., p. 115). Aside from their inherent historical interest, these remarks suggest the extent to which Ibn Taymīya sees even forbidden sexual alliances in terms of misinformed or distorted doctrines and values. The fundamental problem is not lust, which he regards as a human universal; Ibn Taymīya greets with great skepticism the claims of Sufi shaykhs that they have refined the base passions out of their souls and thus can interact freely with unrelated women. Rather, Ibn Taymīya sees his contemporaries as doctrinally misguided and sorely in need of a good exegete and jurist (services that he is more than ready to supply).

¹⁶On this question see Ali (2010, p. 182).

Ibn Taymīya's Views in Context

How mainstream, or (conversely) how idiosyncratic are the views on love that Ibn Taymīya presents in this work? On the one hand, the book has significant polemical elements that place Ibn Taymīya's doctrine of love in explicit contrast to those of many other medieval Muslims. His emphasis on the mutual love between God and believers is a direct response to Ash'arite theological doctrines denying that God could be either the subject or the object of love in the affective sense (see, for instance, Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, pp. 50–52). On the other hand, his emphasis on the idea that even sincere and passionate love of the divine may be misguided is directed primarily at the Sufis. Joseph Norment Bell has discussed these elements of Ibn Taymīya's arguments in great depth (Bell 1979, pp. 46–91). These parallel but opposite polemical engagements deeply inform Ibn Taymīya's focus on love. On the one hand, he is at great pains to recover the affective dimension of religious devotion from a theological tradition that he believes to have rendered God inaccessible to worship in the true sense. As he repeats untiringly both in this book and elsewhere, Ibn Taymīya defines worship (*'ibāda*) as the combination of the utmost love with the utmost humility (Ibn Taymīya, *n.d.*, p. 33, 68, 98; see also Katz 2013, p. 65; Hoover 2019, pp. 42–45). On the other hand, he wishes to reclaim pious emotion from the Sufis who threaten to corner the market on emotionally intense worship. By threading the needle between these two major trends within the Islamic piety of his time, Ibn Taymīya both combines elements of some of the most influential forms of contemporary Islamic thought and shows himself to be outside of them. On a number of specific doctrinal points, many of his fellow Muslim scholars would have found much to offend them in this book.

Yet in other ways Ibn Taymīya's doctrine of love can be seen as quite mainstream. This is primarily because it revolves so centrally around close reading of relevant passages from the Qur'an (and to a lesser extent the ḥadīth). Indeed, shorn of its Qur'anic citations this would be a rather short book. Ibn Taymīya's most basic theses in this work reflect a fairly straightforward understanding of the Qur'ān's statements about love. Denis Gril writes in an analysis of the Qur'anic passages dealing with love that in the Qur'anic view,

Humanity... finds itself split between two incompatible loves: the one that leads to faith and conformity with the divine will, and the other, which brings one to the nether world (cf. Q 2:216). The close link between faith and love also conditions love between human beings. One can only truly love believers, since love for unbelievers separates one from God and attracts one towards this world...

Furthermore, "Love, and its opposite, establishes ... a law defining human actions according to the extent to which they conform or fail to conform to the divine will" (Gril 2018). Ibn Taymīya's arguments in this book thus reflect a viable and cohesive overall reading of the Qur'an's theology of love.

Given its thorough grounding in Qur'anic proof-texts, Ibn Taymīya's interpretation of love is far from idiosyncratic in its basic outlines. It is also centrally based on ḥadīth texts with a long history of interpretation that paralleled (and possibly

inspired) Ibn Taymīya's approach. The eleventh-century Andalusian Mālikī Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 1057) anticipates major components of Ibn Taymīya's analysis in his interpretation of a ḥadīth in which the Prophet declares,

Whoever has the following three traits experiences the sweetness of faith: That God and His Prophet are more beloved to him than anything else; that the person loves what he loves only for the sake of God; and that he hates to return to unbelief as he would hate to be cast into the fire.

Much like Ibn Taymīya, Ibn Baṭṭāl asserts that "The servant's love for his Creator is adhering to His obedience and refraining from disobedience to Him, because of God's statement: 'Say, If you love God, then follow me, and God will love you' [Qur'an 3:31]... Similarly, love of the Messenger of God is adherence to his Sharī'a and being obedient to him." He also emphasizes the friendship of believers, concluding that "What is intended by the ḥadīth is exhortation to love one another for the sake of God and to cooperate in good works and piety and in what leads to eternal felicity." He similarly agrees with Ibn Taymīya's overall view that love and hate necessarily result from an individual's perception of benefit and harm. Also like Ibn Taymīya, he takes a highly cognitivist approach in which deficient love of God and the Prophet is a matter of deficient knowledge and the solution is to inform and to remind. Citing the tenth-century authority al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Baṭṭāl concludes:

[I]f the person remembers the prior favors of God and of His Prophet and what they bestowed upon him by guiding him to Islam and saving him from straying, and making known to him the means that will lead him to salvation from eternal torment and immortality in hell, and other blessings that he received from Him that cannot be recompensed, and which he did not deserve from God due to a prior good deed on his part, but rather [received] due to God's pure grace—if he remembers all this] then he must sincerely love God and His Prophet above any other love (Ibn Baṭṭāl 2003, pp. 67–68).

Without going into detail, one can say that similar themes emerge from the work of ḥadīth commentators working both before and after Ibn Taymīya. In the work of these authors, proper love is both a disciplined and disciplining emotion. There is a vital distinction between the love that may occur spontaneously or *de facto* and the love that a pious person is obligated to cultivate. Proper love is evoked most centrally by learning and rehearsing the facts about God and the Prophet, from which appropriate feelings will naturally arise. A person who successfully produces this disciplined love will not only adhere to the divine law but exhort others to do so, and if necessary struggle against those who resist. A central feature of this shrewd yet idealistic view of love is that it forges a union between enlightened self-interest and the loftiest religious values. Although there is no reason to doubt that this view of religious love and the means by which it is cultivated was sincerely held by the authors in question, it also bears a clear functional relationship to the sources of these scholars' own religious and social prestige. It was above all through the transmission and dissemination of sound textual knowledge about God and the Prophet—that is, through the application of their own expertise—that the affective dispositions necessary for salvation could be produced.

The fact that in his own time Ibn Taymīya's approach to love was neither an isolated nor a merely abstract one is suggested by the work of an otherwise obscure Ḥanafī contemporary, Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī. Al-Turkumānī's one known work is a polemic against religious innovations (*bida'*) that diverge from the Prophet's sunna. Unlike Ibn Taymīya's, this is a work of few scholarly pretensions that engages with popular practice in a vigorously exhortatory mode. The theme of obedience to the Qur'an and the sunna as the only true manifestation of love for God and the Prophet is a leitmotif of this work. Near the beginning of the book al-Turkumānī exclaims, "How deluded is a servant [of God] who claims to love God and His Messenger, then deviates from the commands of the Book and the sunna..." (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 3). As evidence of the inevitable relationship between love and obedience he cites verse 3:31 of the Qur'an repeatedly over the course of the work: "If you love God, follow me and God will love you and forgive your sins; God is all-forgiving, merciful" (C.f. Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 4, 10, 19–20, 78, 96). He also cites ḥadīth such as "Whoever loves my sunna loves me, and whoever loves me, will be with me in Paradise" (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 33) and "a person is with those he loves [i.e., in the afterlife]" (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 74). Overall, it is a believer's greatest calamity to "love what God detests, and hate what He loves" (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 60). Al-Turkumānī cites poetry as evidence that "a lover always obeys the one he loves" (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 11) and uses the name of Laylā (the legendary beloved of classical Arabic poetry) as a figure for the divine love that can be won only through exclusive fidelity to the Qur'an and the sunna:

The men of the neighborhood say that you desire
 To see the beauties of Laylā; may you die of the malady of desires!
 How can you see Laylā with an eye with which
 You see others, and which you have not purified with tears?
 (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 23).

One might again assume that al-Turkumānī's identification of true love with obedience of God and the Prophet appropriates a spiritually resonant theme while emptying it of actual emotional content. However, a close reading of the text suggests that rather than replacing the ecstatic emotionality of Sufi devotion (which he, like Ibn Taymīya, sternly rebukes) with an arid legalism, al-Turkumānī is proposing an alternative model of pious emotion. His model Muslim is far from being an impassive stickler for the letter of the law. In support of the idea that God loves those who rejoice in their fidelity to the sunna but not those who exult in their deviation from it, he tells the following story:

One day a disobedient person woke up [and found that] his soul loved obedience and hated disobedience. Out of the intensity of his joy he got up and began to prance around his house, and the house could scarcely contain him. His wife said to him, "What is this way of walking that that I haven't seen to be your habit before?" He said, "Who is more entitled to it than I? He has become my Lord and I have become His slave. [If someone who] was his own slave becomes the slave of his Lord, is he not entitled to rejoice?" (Ibn Baydakīn al-Turkumānī 1406/1986, p. 11)

In this passage, obedience to God and the Prophet is entwined with a rich set of affective states. Love of God is love of obedience to His commands, and the resulting relationship of servanthood to the Divine is accompanied by an ebullient and religiously virtuous joy.

Conclusion

Ibn Taymīya's understanding of love may seem antithetical to the most prevalent understandings of love in the secondary literature on Sufism, which often emphasizes its role as a universal value transcending social hierarchies and interreligious boundaries. In advocating that personal affection and loyalty be channeled within limits strictly corresponding to the dictates of the Sharī'a, he adumbrates the doctrine of *walā'* and *barā'* ("affiliation and dissociation") that is one of the most characteristic features of modern radical Islam (a trend inspired in part by a reappropriation of Ibn Taymīya's political thought).¹⁷ It is tempting to conclude that Ibn Taymīya's account of love is merely a narrow and constrained shadow of the all-embracing love familiar from Sufi poetry. However, as we have seen above, recent scholarship suggests that love is almost always (on the human plane) inextricably intertwined with the construction and sustaining of boundaries and hierarchies. Thus, Ibn Taymīya's approach reveals a dimension of love that is distinctive neither to law as a mode of religious practice nor to Islam as a tradition.

The point here is neither to deny the spiritual depth or liberatory potential of Sufi approaches to love, nor to claim that love has comparable salience in legal and mystical discourses. Although Ibn Taymīya's basic premise that love of God and the Prophet implies obedience to the revealed law was clearly shared by many fellow advocates of a more Sharī'a-based social and political order, the degree of attention he devotes to the subject is unusual (and may very well be elicited by the challenge of Sufism). Nevertheless, looking at a case like Ibn Taymīya's legal reading of love destabilizes the assumption that love is an inherently universalistic and egalitarian value standing in implicit contrast with the particularistic, authoritarian and hierarchical values associated with law. Sara Ahmed critiques "how acting in the name of love can work to enforce a particular ideal onto others by requiring that they live up to an ideal to enter the community" (Ahmed 2014, p. 139). If the multicultural nation is bound together by its love of love, then groups that are perceived to fall short of this ideal—for instance, immigrant groups seen to be bound too closely by their own particularisms—are in danger of stigmatization due to their perceived failures of love (Ahmed 2014, p. 135, 139). Muslims who emphasize adherence to the Sharī'a rather than the supposedly unbounded love associated with Sufism in the West can fall prey to this dynamic, being perceived as the literalist "bad Muslims" described by Mahmood Mamdani (Mamdani 2002). In this context, Ibn Taymīya's vision of Sharī'a-compliance as the ultimate realization of love for the divine may come as a welcome corrective.

¹⁷On this doctrine see Wagemakers (2009, pp. 81–106).

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