

Aḥmad Sam'ānī on Divine Mercy

by William C. Chittick

More than other manifestations of Islam, Sufism focuses upon the ultimate goal of Islamic practice and faith, which is the transformation of the human soul through love for God and through finding the presence of God in everyday life. It is a deepening of Islam that attempts to make God, and God alone, the object of one's search, the motivation for one's every activity, and the constant companion in one's earthly journey.

Among the many manifestations of Sufism over Islamic history has been a rich and diverse theoretical literature, dealing with every level of Islamic practice and faith. In theological discussions, what characterizes the Sufi approach is a focus on the presence of God in the world and the soul. In contrast, the perspective of *kalām* (i.e., dogmatic theology) stresses God's absence and distance from the world. For the purposes of the present discussion, this differing stress has important repercussions. By paying almost exclusive attention to God's otherness, incomparability and transcendence, *kalām* highlights those divine attributes that keep God far from human concerns. Pope John Paul II in his recent book has said that "the God of the Koran... is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is *only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us* [his emphasis]" (John Paul II 1994, p. 92). This is a picture of God that few Muslims would recognize, but the statement does reflect the dominant trend in *kalām*. However, *kalām* is simply one form of Islamic theology, and certainly not the most important form over history. It has always been

primarily an academic discipline, and it has had little effect on the way that the vast majority of Muslims actually live and practice their religion. In contrast, Sufism has always affected all levels of Islamic society, not just the scholars. As a result, Sufi expressions of Islamic theology have been far more influential in shaping the general Muslim attitude toward God, and the Sufi way of looking at God highlights His nearness, similarity, and immanence—that is, "God-with-us," as Pope John Paul put it.

These differing stresses of Sufism and *kalām* may not be obvious if we look simply at the theological topics that are discussed. It is necessary also to pay attention to the rhetorical methods of the two schools of thought in order to understand how their differing emphases became manifest in expressions of Islamic religiosity. Following Ibn 'Arabī, one of the greatest of all Muslim theologians and Sufis, we can differentiate the perspective of *kalām* from that of Sufism by noting that the primary methodology of the *kalām* authorities is rational interpretation of the Koran, while the primary methodology of the Sufi authorities is the analogical and 'imaginal' reading of the same text. In other words, *kalām* takes reason as its fundamental tool, while Sufism also employs the creative imagination. In Ibn 'Arabī's terms, *kalām* insists upon God's absence and otherness. It takes the Koranic verse that says "Nothing is like Him" (42: 11) as its fundamental hermeneutical principle. As a result, the *kalām* authorities take great pains to prove rationally that God is beyond human understanding, and they

do this by interpreting the concrete imagery of Koranic language in abstract terms. In contrast, Sufism insists that God is not only absent and other, but also present and same. The Koranic verses that the Sufis take as expressing their fundamental hermeneutical principle enunciate the Islamic perception of 'God-with-us.' They include "He is with you wherever you are" (57: 4) and "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2: 115).

In short, reason abstracts God from the world, but imagination sees the world as an image of God. Reason knows absence, but imagination knows presence. When the Prophet, in a famous *ḥadīth*, divided Islam into three levels or dimensions—*islām* or practice, *īmān* or faith and *iḥsān* or "doing what is beautiful"—he said that *iḥsān* means that you should worship and serve God "as if" you see Him.¹ For Ibn 'Arabī, this "as if" establishes imagination as the key to perceiving the presence of God in all things. It is precisely the stress that Sufis place upon imagination as the proper means to represent God in His all-pervading mercy that explains the pervasiveness of the Sufi theological vision in pre-modern Islamic literature. By far the most popular form of literature in the Islamic countries has always been poetry, especially poetry chanted or sung to music. The basic theme of poetry is love, and it is part of the poet's art to bring the beloved into the imagination. The task carried out by the Sufi poets was to bring God within reach. It is no accident that many, if not most, of the major poets of Islamic languages were Sufis, while no *kalām* authority is remembered as a poet.

The basic goal of Sufi writing has always been to make people aware of the presence of God and to stir up love for Him in the heart. Abstract categories do not fan the fire of love. Lovers want to be near their beloved, and if they cannot have the beloved in their embrace, they want at least to be able to keep the beloved in mind. The picture in their mind must be beautiful, attractive, and captivating in order to stir up love. It must encourage intimacy and constant remembrance. But abstract categories rarely have this effect. That is why Ibn 'Arabī writes, "If we had remained with our rational proofs—which, in the opinion of the rational thinkers, establish knowledge of God's Essence, showing that 'He is not like this' and 'not like that', no created thing would ever have loved God" (quoted in Chittick 1989, p. 180). In other words, if talk of God in Islam had been left in the hands of the jurists and the *kalām* authorities, Muslims would be stuck with a God who is, in the words of the Pope, "only Majesty." They would fear Him but not love Him. But fortunately, most God talk in Islam is rooted in the concrete imagery of the Koran, the *ḥadīth* and the poetical tradition of the Islamic languages. This makes it easy to understand God's presence and to love Him, and it means that love for the Merciful God has always been the key to Islamic popular religion.

If God is present in the world and in the soul, he is present through His love and concern for His creatures, and this love and concern is typically called His *raḥma*, His mercy. In the Sufi perspective, it is God's presence that is all important, not his absence.

Over the centuries, a large number of important scholars, sages and saints have spoken in the name of Sufism. Many of these, especially from the eleventh Christian century onward, spoke theologically about the place of *raḥma* in the Islamic conceptual universe. Most of the Sufi authorities well known in the West, such as Rūmī and Ibn 'Arabī, frequently speak about God's mercy towards His creatures. For Ibn 'Arabī in particular, God's mercy is the constant point of reference whereby all things must be judged.

If any divine attribute is discussed more than mercy in Sufism, it is certainly love. In many ways love is the most important single issue in Sufi literature. Love and mercy are, of course, intimately interrelated, and sometimes the terms are used almost synonymously. However, on the theological level, there is one major difference between the two concepts, and this is obvious in Koranic usage. In the Koran, God is both merciful and loving, and so also human beings may be both merciful and loving. The object of God's love and mercy is His creation, human beings in particular. Human beings also can love God or His creatures, but human mercy extends only to other creatures, not to God. In other words, God may be the object of human love, but He cannot be the object of human mercy. Hence love is a two-way street, but mercy flows only in one direction, from the divine into the created order.

In order to grasp some of the implications of the Sufi understanding of *raḥma*, we need to review briefly the way in which the term is employed in the Koran. The first key to the range of meanings found in the word is probably the formula of consecration that begins the Koran's chapters: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." 'Merciful' and 'Compassionate' render the two Arabic words *raḥmān* and *raḥīm*, both of which derive from the word *raḥma*, and each of which may be said to designate a specific kind of *raḥma*. Koran commentators and theologians have devoted a great deal of effort to explaining the significance of referring to God's mercy by these two different divine names. For his part, Ibn 'Arabī often associates these two names with the two sorts of mercy that are implied in the following Koranic verse: "My chastisement—I strike with it whom I will, but My mercy embraces all things. So I shall prescribe it [that is, My mercy] for those who are Godfearing and pay the alms, and those who indeed have faith in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger" (7: 156).

This verse begins by differentiating between mercy and chastisement. It tells us that chastisement will be

visited upon anyone whom God wills (and of course other verses make clear that these are God's ungrateful and disbelieving servants). Then the verse tells us that mercy embraces all things, and 'all things' necessarily include those who suffer God's chastisement. As Ibn 'Arabī likes to point out, even chastisement is the object of mercy, because it is a thing. Finally, the verse turns to designating those for whom mercy will be prescribed—that is, those who follow God's Messenger.

This verse, then, has often been read as referring to the two sorts of mercy that are designated by the names Merciful and Compassionate. The mercy of the Merciful is universal, because it embraces all things. Like the rain that falls upon the good and the evil alike, it is shown to everything without exception. In the interpretation of Ibn 'Arabī and his school, this mercy is existence itself, the bounty and gift of being, a gift that is inconceivable without God's generosity. Nothing stands outside this mercy, because everything in the universe is embraced by God's goodness and being.

The mercy of the Compassionate is prescribed for those who have faith in God and follow the Messenger. This sort of mercy does not embrace all things, only those who attain to God's forgiveness and favor through observing His instructions as revealed in the Koran and other scriptures. This mercy is the conceptual opposite of chastisement. Those who reach this second mercy will never suffer, but those who are embraced only by the first kind of mercy may indeed suffer so long as they continue to reject God's authority over them.

In Sufi discussions of mercy, the most important single principle is probably that which is enunciated in a famous *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet tells us that the inscription on God's Throne reads, "My mercy takes precedence over My wrath." Given that there are two basic levels of mercy, there are two basic levels in which mercy takes precedence over wrath. The first pertains to God's universal, all-embracing mercy. As indicated, this mercy is God's overflowing goodness

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that gives rise to the existence of the universe and everything within it. Wrath then is the power in the created order that takes existence away from the things of the universe. After all, God, in Koranic terms, is both the Life-giver (*muhyi*) and the Death-giver (*mumit*). Wrath becomes manifest through death and destruction, and, among sentient beings, through suffering. But God's mercy takes precedence over the wrath of nonexistence, which is to say that wrath and nonexistence are accidental qualities in the universe. The fundamental qualities of reality are mercy and gentleness, because these pertain to the very Being of God, the source of all good, while wrath and chastisement are only conceivable in distance and separation from that Being, or in the lack of being. However, all things exist precisely through the being that they have been given, and this being takes precedence over the non-being that touches them, because non-being has no rooting in reality itself. Hence, the universe is inundated in the divine mercy, whether or not the creatures are aware of this fact in any given situation. In short, on this first level, "God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath" means that the fundamental attributes of reality are overflowing goodness, generosity, bestowal, kindness and gentleness and that the opposites of these qualities have no permanence.

On a second level, the principle that God's mercy takes precedence over His wrath has specific implications for eschatology. The divine name Compassionate is associated with the mercy that is given to those who go to paradise, a mercy that is not given to those who enter hell. However, even in hell, mercy will take precedence over wrath in the long run, just as it took precedence at the origin of creation. Gradually God will remove the sinners from the Fire. As for those whose sin is of the sort which, according to the Koran, will not be forgiven, they will stay in the Fire, but eventually they will cease experiencing it as pain and suffering. In short, the Koranic principle that God's mercy embraces all things must win out in

the end. Every created thing must eventually experience God's goodness and bounty in a pleasurable and pleasant manner. Thus the idea that hell's chastisement cannot be 'everlasting' is commonplace in Sufi writings, and it is even approved of by some of the *kalām* authorities.

I could continue by discussing other implications of the Sufi understanding of mercy and its division into two sorts, but doing so would keep me in the abstract, rational mode of discourse that is characteristic of *kalām*. This way of talking about God is also found in some Sufi writings, but most Sufis prefer the images and symbols that appeal to the imagination. Anyone looking for examples of the beautiful ways that Sufis employ to allow us to imagine God and to stir up love for Him can hardly do better than reading the poetry of Rūmī. But given that Rūmī is now well-known in the West, I want to turn instead to a little-known prose work by a Sufi preacher of the twelfth century named Ahmad Sam'ānī (d. A.H. 534/A.D. 1140), who was a member of a well-known family of scholars from Nayshāpūr in Iran.

Sam'ānī's Persian commentary on the divine names was almost forgotten in modern times and has just recently been published, so he has largely been ignored by the scholarly community. This six-hundred page work, however, is a great classic of Persian prose and a magnificent hymn to God's mercy. In the rest of the paper, I will quote a few short but typical selections from Sam'ānī's work.²

The first selection derives from Sam'ānī's explanation of the names Merciful and Compassionate. Since these two typically come in the formula, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," Sam'ānī addresses, among other things, the relationship between the name God itself (*Allāh* in Arabic), which is typically understood as the most important of God's names, and the two names of mercy. Notice that throughout the passage, the author repeatedly juxtaposes God's attributes of distance and transcendence, such as majesty and severity, with his attributes of nearness and immanence, such as

beauty and gentleness. He writes:

The name *God* gives news of the power of the Real to create out of nothing, while the names *Merciful* and *Compassionate* give news of the help He gives as a gratuitous gift. Hence He brings the object of His desire into existence through His power, and His servants come to acknowledge His unity [*tawhīd*] through His help...

There is a mystery hidden in this phrase: Hearing the names Merciful and Compassionate is a wine poured into the cup of joy and placed in the goblet of intimacy, a wine that God Himself gives to His lovers without intermediary... When God's friends, in the rose garden of gentleness, on the lawn of the covenant, and in the company of lovers, drink down this wine of yearning, they begin to seek. When they seek, they rejoice. When they rejoice, they fly beyond the cage of the two worlds. When they fly, they arrive. When they arrive, they reach themselves. Then, in that state, their rational faculties are drowned in God's gentleness, and their hearts are consumed by the unveiling of the mysteries. They lose themselves and they find Him. The sun of beginningless gentleness shines on the garden of their hearts, and the nasturtium of intimacy blooms in that holy garden. The jasmine of the covenant grows up, the lily of faithfulness and the rose of purity show their heads, and the nightingales of generous gifts sing on the sweet herbs of allusion.

Another mystery: Through the name God He unveiled Himself to His servants. But the name God is mixed with severity, and they did not have the capacity to listen to this word. Hence He placed the salve of mercy on their hearts through the name Merciful, and thus they gained subsistence. Otherwise, they would have been made nonexistent through the awe of the name God, and neither name nor sign of them would remain...

Another mystery: He is Merciful through providing ease, Compassionate through giving intimations; Merciful through acts of kindness, Compassionate through lights; Merciful through giving benefits, Compassionate through fending off; Merciful by disclosing Himself, Compassionate by taking charge; Merciful through blessing, Compassionate through protection; Merciful through the general de-

ployment of blessings, Compassionate through the specific unveiling of generosity; Merciful through making devotional acts easy, Compassionate through verifying *the most beautiful and increase* [Koran 10: 26]...

First He said, "God," and this word gives news of unlimited power. Then He said, "Merciful," which is an allusion to feeding, nurturing, and strengthening through blessing. Then He said, "Compassionate," which lets us know of the mercy in the end.

It is as if He addressed His servants like this: "I have created you with My power, I have brought you up with My blessing, and I have forgiven you with My mercy. At the beginning is My power in the midst of My blessing; at the end, My mercy—the ocean of Power in eternity without beginning, the ocean of mercy in eternity without end, and the ocean of blessing in the present. When these three are brought together, how can a handful of clay's darkness appear?"

This explains why a great Sufi said, "When the ocean of mercy sends up the waves of generosity and true knowledge, every sin and every act of disobedience turns into nothing. For the sin was not, and mercy ever is. How can 'was not' stand up to 'ever is'?" (Sam'ānī 1989, pp. 10-11)

The second passage is taken from Sam'ānī's commentary on the divine name *al-Karīm*, the 'Generous' or 'Noble'.

Generous is one of the divine names. In the Arabic language, this name is applied to a person who pardons offenders and overlooks sinners. If someone should do something ugly to such a person, he does something beautiful in return. Such a person the Arabs call 'generous'. In fact this name is a metaphor when used for created things, and a reality only when used for God. Every day God increases His beautiful doing toward you, but you increase your disobedience and offense in face of His giving.

It was said to a great man, "How are you this morning?" He replied, "I awoke and with me were so many of God's blessings that I could not count them. I am drowned in the ocean of shame because of my many acts of disobedience. I do not know what to

thank Him for—for the beautiful things that He has spread out, or for the ugly things that He has concealed."

God's gentleness toward His servants has no end and His generosity has no limit... He has a gentleness that has outpaced the mothers and the fathers. *God is gentle to His servants* (42: 19)...

Included in His gentleness and generosity is that He sends the prophets calling to His presence even though He has absolutely no need to do so.

"My poor servant. If I should not have you, how would I lose? But if you should not have Me, what would you be? Who would look after you? Who would act beautifully toward you? Who would take care of you? Who would have mercy upon you? Who would pay any attention to your situation?"

"I am not satisfied that you should not belong to Me. Are you satisfied that you should not belong to Me? O you of little loyalty! O you of much disloyalty! If you obey Me, I give thanks to you.³ If you remember Me, I remember you.⁴ If you take one step for My sake, I fill the heavens and the earth with gratitude to you.

"My servant, is it not disloyalty that you call to Me once, and I respond to you,⁵ but I call to you a thousand times, and you do not respond to Me? *So let them respond to Me!* (2: 186)

"Although I said to your father Adam once, 'Get out,' I have said to you a thousand times, 'Return!' *God summons to the abode of peace* (10: 25). Even though you are disloyal, come to My court, for I have prepared many things for you..."

O My servants who have been immoderate against yourselves, do not despair of God's mercy—surely God will forgive all sins (39: 53). It has been reported that someone recited this verse before God's Messenger. When the reciter reached the words, *surely God will forgive all sins*, the Prophet said, "Indeed He will, and He does not care." Then he said, three times, "God curse the alienators," that is, those who make people despair of God's mercy.

It is reported that Moses said, "My God, You desire disobedience from the servants, but You dislike disobedience." God replied, "That is in order to set up My pardon."

Here a good question arises. What if someone asks, "With all the honor and eminence that have

been bestowed upon human beings, why has God judged that they must be tested by disobedience?"

This question has several answers. First, you can say that the wisdom in this is that the servant may not become proud, for pride calls down the veil...

Another answer: The cleverness, skill and mastery of the glassmaker appears in broken glass. Your heart is like glass. The stone of disobedience has struck against it and broke it. The Lord of Might, through the fire of repentance, brings it back to wholeness. *Verily I am All-forgiving to him who repents* (20: 82). Even if He said to Moses in the majesty of his state, *Verily I am God* (20: 14), He said to us, *Verily I am All-forgiving*.

Another answer is this: God has two storehouses, one full of reward, and the other full of forgiveness and mercy. If you obey Him, you receive reward and generous gifts, but if you disobey Him you receive mercy and forgiveness. Thereby His storehouses do not go to waste. (Sam'ānī 1989, pp. 367-69)

Sam'ānī's discussion of the name Generous goes on in the same manner for several pages, and most of it is devoted to explaining the wide-ranging implications of the Koranic verse that tells people not to despair of God's mercy, because He will forgive all sins. In the midst of the passage, Sam'ānī alludes to a well-known report that on the Day of Resurrection, the Prophet, in contrast to others, will be concerned not for his own well-being, but only that of his followers. And he explains how the intercession that will be granted to the Prophet on the Day of Resurrection is an aspect of God's mercy. He writes:

On the Day of Resurrection, you will say, "My body, my body!" Muhammad will say, "My community, my community!" Paradise will say, "My share, my share!" Hell will say, "My portion, my portion." The Lord of Might will say, "My servant, My servant!"

"Many thousands of creatures have called to Me in many languages by glorifying Me and declaring that there is no God but I,⁶ but I have never said to any of them (except human beings), 'Here I am, My servant, *Call upon Me,*

and I will respond to you'. (40: 60).

"It is many years—and what is this talk of years and months?—that I have been saying, 'My servant!', and you have never said 'Here I am.' You should be ashamed. Do you not see that God says, *Let them respond to me* (2:186)? My servant, when you call upon Me, I respond. Why is it that when I call upon you, you do not respond?"

"Do not despair of God's mercy (39: 53). Be careful not to lose hope in My mercy, and do not cease wishing for My pardon. Even if your sins are without limit, your defects without number, and your slips beyond reckoning, it is appropriate that My mercy have no boundary, My pardon no measure, and My generosity no reckoning."

In the midst of all this, Satan struck out at Adam by saying that he was made of clay. "O Accursed One, you see the outer surface, adorned with clay. You do not see the hidden center, adorned with the heart. [*God has made faith lovable to you, and*] *He has made it beautiful within your hearts'* (49: 7).

"O angels, you have obedience! O messengers, you have messengerhood! O pious ascetics, you have asceticism! O worshipers, you have worship! O disobedient servants, you have the Lord! Surely you know that the Prophet has said, 'Whoever does ugly deeds or wrongs himself and then asks forgiveness from God will find God. Whoever finds God and sees his own share with Him will not wish for other than God.'"

Noble youth! When God wanted to drape you with a robe of honor, He said *Your Lord*, thereby ascribing Himself to you. When He wanted to free you from chastisement, He ascribed you to Himself, saying, *My servants*.

Look at the Throne to see tremendousness, look at the Footstool to see capaciousness, look at the Tablet to see inscription, look at the heavens to see exaltation, look at the heart to see knowledge, look at knowledge to see love, and look at love to see the Beloved.

At the beginning of the verse, he says, *O my servants!* At the end of the verse He says, *Turn unto your Lord* (39: 54). "O you to whom I belong, and O you who belong to Me! *Do not despair!* Do not lose hope in My Mercy, for the servant is not without sins, and the Lord is not without mercy.

"I have promised that I shall

forgive. If I had said, 'I have forgiven,' the intercession of the Messenger would be nullified and he would not possess the exaltation of intercession. On the Day of Resurrection, Muḥammad will intercede, and I will forgive, so that he may possess the glory of intercession, I may possess the glory of divinity, and you, the faithful servant, having been forgiven, may possess the glory of faith. *To God belongs the glory, and to the Messenger, and to the faithful* (63: 8)... When Muḥammad provides the intercession and God has given the promise of mercy, how should sin be any danger for the objects of forgiveness?"

Moses said, "O God, why do you provide for the stupid and deprive the clever?" He replied, "So that the clever may know that provision depends upon apportioning, not upon cleverness." On the Day of Resurrection, He will forgive the disobedient so that the creatures may know that mercy is a gift, not an earning. It comes through God's solicitude, not through the servant's worship.

"Did I not call you My servants in many places? *Tell My servants* (15: 49), *Say to My servants* (14: 31), *When My servants ask you* (2: 186), *O My servants* (29: 56). I did this so that you would know that there is no place for alienation.

"If I have called you Mine, that is no surprise. What is surprising is that I have called Myself yours. *Your God is one God* (2: 163.) *I am your Lord, so serve Me* (21:92). *That is because God is the protector of those who have faith* (47: 11). *Your Lord is God who created the heavens and the earth* (7: 54). Noble youth! When a king of this world calls himself someone's own, that person is proud before everyone. O friend, be happy, for I have called Myself your own.

"I have called Myself the Clement, the Compassionate: *Verily God is Clement to the people, Compassionate* (2:143). And the messenger is *clement and compassionate to those who have faith* (9: 128). How could a helpless person perish between two who are compassionate? I am compassionate, My messenger is compassionate, his companions are compassionate—*compassionate among themselves* (48: 29)—and his community is the object of compassion, for he has said 'My community is a community to which compassion will be shown.'"

"When someone comes to the resurrection obedient—*That is the Garden that We shall give to those of Our servants who are Godfearing* (19: 63). And when people come to it indigent—tell them, through God's bounty and mercy, *Do not despair of God's mercy*. For My mercy is beginningless, but your disobedience is temporal. The beginningless overcomes the temporal, not the temporal the beginningless." (Sam'ānī 1989, pp. 371-72)

The third and final passage is taken from Sam'ānī's commentary on the two divine names, the High and the Great, both of which are classified as names of majesty. Meditation upon them leads to an understanding of human inadequacy in the face of God's greatness and grandeur. This inadequacy becomes manifest, of course, in sin and in failure to observe God's instructions as they should be observed. But human inadequacy pertains to the very nature of what it means to be human, and God, having created human beings with this nature, nevertheless chose them over all other creatures as the objects of His mercy and love. Hence, for Sam'ānī, the sinful nature of human beings is itself the key to their status with God, for it shows that the value of human beings does not lie in any worthiness on their part, but rather in God's mercy and love toward them. The important thing for people to understand is not that they are sinners, but that God is merciful, and that His mercy takes precedence over His wrath. This, in the last analysis, is the determining factor of their destiny, not their sinful nature.

Even if you are overcome by many great sins, the Creator's love will not leave you, for sinning is your attribute, but love is His attribute. The attributes of weak and insignificant temporal things do not detract from the attributes of the subtle and aware Eternal God.

The Prophet said, relating the words of his Lord, "If My servant encounters Me with offenses that fill the earth, I will encounter him with their like of forgiveness, and I don't care." Yahyā Ma'ādh said, "Even if the servant sins and he

Come Scatter Blossoms

From *Divan-i Hafiz*

Translated from the Original Persian by Terry Graham

Come scatter blossoms and pour wine in goblets,
Split the heavens asunder and plan it all anew!

Lace with rosewater the crimson wine brimming in the cup;
Sugar the incense in the censer to unleash a perfumed breeze!

If sorrow launches an army to spill the blood of lovers,
Saqi and I will charge against it, rooting it out from the core!

With a merry viol in hand, O minstrel, strike up a merry strain,
So we can sing out with hands a-waving and with feet a-dancing!

If you want the Garden of Eden, come with us to the winehouse,
So we can send you straight from the vat into the Fountain of Kauthar.

Some support the claims of reason, others: transports of trances;
Come present all these opinions before the ultimate Judge!

Eloquence and rhetoric are not practised in Shiraz;
Come on, Hafiz, and let us go off to someplace else!

does not care, he has a Lord who forgives sins, and does not care.”...

When you sin, He calls you ‘ignorant’ so that He may pardon you, just as He called Adam ignorant: *He was ignorant, wrongdoing* (33: 72). When you bear witness, He calls you ‘knowledgeable’ so that He may accept you: *God bears witness that there is no God but He, as do the angels and the possessors of knowledge* (3: 18). When you obey Him, He calls you ‘weak’—and man was created weak (4: 28)—so that He may pardon your shortcomings.

Verily I am the Forgiving, the Compassionate (15:49). “It is I who forgive disobedience, and it is you who disobey, for everyone does what comes to him naturally. If you want *not* to disobey, you cannot do it, for you are you. And if I want *not* to show mercy, it will never happen, for I am I, and I am Merciful, Compassionate, Forbearing, and Generous.

“Whenever you put something in water, the water makes it wet—not at your command, but because that is water’s nature. When you put something in fire, the fire burns it—not at your request, but because that is fire’s attribute. The sun and the moon give light, not to be nice to you, but because that is their work. I also will forgive you, not because of your virtue, but because forgiveness is My attribute.”

Someone said to musk, “You have one defect: No matter who it is that you are with, you give off a sweet fragrance.” Musk replied, “I do not look at who it is I am with, I look at who I am.”

It has been related that Solomon’s vizier Asaf committed a sin. The Lord of Might revealed to Solomon that he should tell Asaf not to repeat it. Solomon conveyed the revelation to Asaf. Asaf replied, “I will do it again,” and he did it again. Again revelation came, and again he said the same thing.

When this occurred for the third time, Gabriel came and said, “The Lord of Might says that this has gone beyond the limit. Now He will send a punishment.”

Asaf went out into the desert and he performed two cycles of prayer. Then he said, “O God, if You do not protect me from sin, I will do it again and again.”

God said, “O Solomon, tell him, ‘As long as you know that protection from sin comes only from Me, I will forgive, and forgive, and forgive.’” (Sam’āni 1989, pp. 337-38)



Notes

1. On the importance of these three terms highlighting the three basic dimensions of Islam as a religion, see Sachiko Murata and W.C. Chittick (1994).

2. On Sam’āni, see Chittick (1992).

3. Allusion to Koran 2: 158: “And whoever volunteers good, God is grateful, knowing.”

4. Allusion to Koran 2: 152: “So remember Me, and I will remember you.”

5. Allusion to Koran 40: 60: “Call upon Me, and I will respond to you.”

6. The reference here is to non-human creatures—not only the angels who glorify God, but also everything in the heavens and the earth, to whose glorifications the Koran makes frequent reference. For example, “The seven heavens and the earth, and everyone within them, glorify Him. There is nothing that does not glorify Him with His praise, but you do not understand their glorification” (17: 44).

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