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**Moses and the Religion of Love:
Thoughts on Methodology in the Study of Sufism**

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I chose the topic of Moses and love for two reasons. First, it gives me a chance to reflect on the manner in which a theological perspective common in Sufi texts may throw some light on the methodological issues that occupy many of our contemporaries in the academy. Second, it provides me with an opportunity to offer a taste of my most enjoyable recent project, the translation of an outstanding but almost unknown Sufi text, namely *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* by Aḥmad Sam'ānī, a 600-page Persian commentary on the names of God [Chittick: forthcoming]. Sam'ānī, who lived in Merv and died in the year 1140, was only rediscovered fifty years ago. Traces of his book are not difficult to find, as in the second half of Maybudī's Quran commentary, *Kashf al-asrār* [Maybudī 2015: xiv], but almost no one remembered Sam'ānī himself until recently. The only real information we have on him is provided by his nephew, Abū Sa'd 'Abd al-Karīm Sam'ānī (d. 1166), author of the well-known biographical dictionary *al-Ansāb*. 'Abd al-Karīm supplies a good deal of information on his own family, including a brief account of a trip to Nishapur with his uncle Aḥmad, who was his primary teacher in jurisprudence. The only other contemporary mention of Aḥmad Sam'ānī that I have been able to find is provided by Ibn 'Asākir, a friend and traveling companion of 'Abd al-Karīm. He narrates Hadith from Aḥmad in *Ta'rīkh madīnat al-Dimashq* and mentions him as one of his many teachers in *Mu'jam al-shuyūkh*. Like 'Abd al-Karīm, Ibn 'Asākir calls Aḥmad a *faqīh*, a "jurist." Neither offers the slightest suggestion that he was a "Sufi."

Unlike most earlier commentators on the divine names, all written in Arabic, Sam'ānī pays little attention to etymology and lexicology. Instead he presents a panorama of theology, cosmology, spiritual psychology, ethics, and Quran commentary while drawing from a whole range of earlier teachers, not least the Sufi tradition as it had developed in Nishapur under the guidance of Abu'l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 1072). *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a remarkable book,

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beautifully written with bold presentations of Islamic theological issues untrammled by the heavy, abstract discussions of the Kalam experts. It is interspersed with numerous anecdotes and a great deal of Persian and Arabic poetry. I consider it the most complete presentation of the Religion of Love in the twelfth century. No doubt *Sawānīh*, the exquisite little treatise by Sam‘ānī’s contemporary, Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 1126), deserves to be recognized as the first Persian classic on love, but *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a far more comprehensive treatment of the topic, and much of its language is no less beautiful than that of Ghazālī.

“The Religion of Love” seems to have been first brought to the attention of the Western reading public by Nicholson in the introduction to his translation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. There he highlights the verse in which Ibn ‘Arabī mentions the expression, though he ignores Ibn ‘Arabī’s commentary on the line. Nicholson set the pattern for interpreting the poem as an expression of a universal love for humanity in something like a modern, United Nations sort of way. In his commentary on the verse, however, Ibn ‘Arabī tells us that the Religion of Love is none other than the Sunnah of the Prophet:

I am alluding to God’s words, “*Follow me; God will love you*” [3:31]. This is why I call it “the Religion of Love” [*dīn al-ḥubb*]. I adhere to it so as to receive the prescriptions of my Beloved with acceptance, contentment, love, and the elimination of hardship and burden in them, whatever those prescriptions may be. This is why I say, “wherever its camels turn their faces.” In other words, whatever course they take, whether they are pleasing or displeasing, I am content with all of them [Chittick 2013b].

Ibn ‘Arabī does not employ the expression *dīn al-ḥubb* in *al-Futūḥāt al-makkīya*, which is to say that it is hardly a technical term in his works. Rūmī sometimes uses parallel expressions, usually *madhhab-i ‘ishq*. Western scholars have singled out the English phrase and given it a prominence that it does not have in the texts, but their efforts play the positive role of helping us focus on a dimension of the Islamic tradition that is too often ignored. Moreover, numerous texts highlight Islam as a religion grounded in love without using this specific expression.

I. Love, Intellect, and Divine Duality

In order to provide a theoretical framework for Sam‘ānī’s account of Moses, let me suggest that one way to understand the importance of love in the Islamic tradition is to look at the tension between *‘aql* and *‘ishq*, intellect and love. Teachers who contrasted the two terms wanted to demonstrate that the puny, “partial” (*juzwī*) intellect of man can never perceive God in His infinite reality, nor can it learn on its own how to serve Him as He deserves. If people

remain tied down by *'aql*—one of whose root meanings is “fetter” (*'iqāl*)—they will never achieve the divine nearness (*qurb*) to which they are called. Only love—which is a fire, as Rūmī says, that “burns away everything other than the Everlasting Beloved” [Rūmī 1925–40: 5:588]—can overcome the constrictions of *'aql* and bridge the gap between Creator and created.

If we trace this way of seeing things back to its theoretical roots in the tradition, we can see that it is not without relevance to the way we academics do Religious Studies generally and Sufi studies specifically. An obvious place to find these theoretical roots is in the notion of *tawhīd*, the first principle of Islamic thought. Given that the Real is one, everything else is two or more. God alone knows Himself as He is, because anything that is many has no capacity to perceive the One per se. What makes a certain human perception of God possible is the fact that, as Ibn 'Arabī often remarks, God is not only One (*wāḥid*), He is also many (*kathīr*). In other words, God is one in His essence (*dhāt*) and many in His names. It follows that we can perceive God through the intermediary of His manyness, which provides the pattern for our own manyness, since He created us in His form (*ṣūra*). It is precisely the divine manyness that is differentiated in the “signs” (*āyāt*)—the pointers, marks, and indicators—whether these are found in scripture, the world, or ourselves. These signs have no independent reality. They serve rather as metaphors (*majāz*), that is, bridges to the True Reality—*al-majāz qaṭarāt al-ḥaqīqa*, as the Arabic proverb puts it.

The One is unknowable in Itself, and the indefinite multiplicity of the signs in the cosmos and the self is unthinkable. It follows that knowledge of the signs needs to be formulated in terms accessible to human limitations. A common way to do so is in terms of God's “ninety-nine names.” This, however, gives a picture of the One that is still far too complex for most people to grasp. In order to provide a focus for discussing what is knowable about the Real, theologians (and philosophers like Avicenna) often talked about seven primary names or attributes. Some Sufi teachers also took this route, though they were more likely to present the discussion in terms of twoness. Even though the absolute oneness of the Real is unknowable, twoness is within the grasp of *'aql*. When we start thinking of the divine signs in these terms, numerous pairs unfold: God and the world, heaven and earth, paradise and hell, light and darkness, male and female, right and left, to mention a few.¹

When human perception of things is classified in terms of complementary signs, these are often traced back to two categories of divine names, commonly called the names of beauty (*jamāl*) and the names of majesty (*jalāl*). In earlier texts a more common pair is *lutf* and *qahr*, gentleness and severity. Also frequent are *raḥma* and *ghaḍab*, mercy and wrath, and *faḍl* and *'adl*, bounty and justice. Closer analysis, taking help from Ibn 'Arabī, allows us to see that these two broad categories of divine names relate to two basic ways of conceptualizing

¹ On the omnipresent dualities in Islamic thought, see Murata [1992].

the One: in terms of distance (*bu'd*) or absence (*ghayb*) and in terms of nearness (*qurb*) or presence (*huḍūr*).

From Ibn 'Arabī onward, the discussion of distance and nearness often goes on in terms of *tanzīh*, the assertion of God's incomparability and transcendence, and *tashbīh*, the assertion of His similarity and immanence. Like *tawḥīd*, *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* are human stances. All three of these words are second-form gerunds, expressing the notion of saying or asserting something. We assert that God is one, and this is called *tawḥīd*. The moment we reflect on this, we see that His oneness demands that He be utterly unique and beyond, totally absent from our experience of the world. In other words we assert His incomparability (*tanzīh*). His oneness also demands that He be the principle of multiplicity. Without the one, there can be no two, three, four, ad infinitum, which is to say that the One Reality is present in all things: "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). All things are signs because everything necessarily reflects His names and attribute. Thus we assert similarity (*tashbīh*). Theologians often say that these two sorts of divine oneness are designated by the divine names *aḥad* and *wāḥid* (hence the contrast between *aḥadīya* or "exclusive unity" and *wāḥidīya* or "inclusive unity" among Ibn 'Arabī's followers).

In discussing *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, Ibn 'Arabī points out that *'aql* is attuned to the former and *khayāl* or imagination to the latter. This is because intellect or reason is a faculty innately inclined to analyze, separate, and discern. In trying to conceptualize the names of the One, it asserts that the divine attributes are other than creaturely attributes and proves this through rational analysis and demonstrative proofs. In contrast the faculty of *khayāl* is innately inclined to find similarity, sameness, and identity. It does not define, prove, and specify; rather, it perceives some things present in other things. It "finds" (*wujūd*) and "witnesses" (*shuhūd*) that the metaphor is the bridge to the reality. Or rather, it sees that the manifest metaphor is nothing other than the concealed reality.

The essential human substance, which is the divine spirit blown into the human clay, is often called the heart (*qalb*). The Quran depicts the heart as the center of the human person, the seat of awareness and consciousness. Ibn 'Arabī tells us that the healthy heart (*qalb salīm*) sees with two eyes: intellect and imagination. With the eye of intellect it perceives God as distant and incomparable, and with the eye of imagination it sees Him as near and similar. Adequate understanding of God, the universe, and the self depends upon seeing with both eyes. Spiritual depth perception, which is a sound and correct understanding of *tawḥīd*, comes from a balanced vision of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*.

II. The *Tanzīh* of the Academy

With this exceedingly brief summary of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings on the One and the many—teachings developed endlessly in his numerous works—we can ask what it has to do with the

tension that Sufi literature sets up between *'aql* and *'ishq*.

Rational analysis, the forte of *'aql* and the basic approach of scholarship past and present, establishes separation, distinction, discernment, and classification. It is relatively static, which is to say that it is interested in showing how things are related to each other and where they stand in the big picture. Its conceptualizations are dominated by *tanzīh*—asserting attributes that demand separation and distinction, like severity, majesty, wrath, and justice. The last of these is especially helpful to understand how *'aql* is associated with *tanzīh*. The basic definition of justice is to put everything in its proper place. As Rūmī says, “What is justice? Putting the thing in its place. // What is wrongdoing [*zulm*]? Putting the thing where it does not belong” [Rūmī 1925–40: 6:2596]. By differentiating, classifying, and putting things where they belong, practitioners of *'aql*, like us academics, are pulled into ever greater multiplicity and differentiation; hence the proliferation of specialties, more pronounced in the modern university than ever before in human history.

As long as *'aql* has the divine Reality in view, its assertion of unity stresses transcendence, that is, it sees with the eye of *tanzīh*. When it ignores the notion of God’s unity, it continues to divide and differentiate ad infinitum, necessarily falling into *takthīr*, the assertion of manyness. Like it or not, *takthīr* brings about disintegration and disharmony, qualities apparent in the curriculum of the modern university or in the escalating proliferation of electronic information and discrete factoids. In contrast *tawhīd* aims for integration and harmony by supplementing *'aql* with *khayāl*. In Islamic scholarship this leads to synthesizing works that highlight love.

When contrasted with *'aql*, *'ishq* is much more than a feeling—feelings and emotions are the least of it. Love is a divine attribute that gives rise to the universe—hence the well-known divine saying, “I was a Hidden Treasure, so I *loved* to be recognized.” The only true love is God’s love—there is no lover and no beloved but God. All created love is a sign and metaphor of divine love. All lovers, human or otherwise, participate in this divine quality. Love brings about “synthesis” because it aims to overcome separation and discernment. Its energy is focused on bridging the gap between lover and beloved. It is innately opposed to intellect’s insistence that this is only this and that is only that. It takes over the soul and erases distinctions, establishing the “union” (*wiṣāl*) of lover and beloved. The more intense it becomes, the more it is worthy of Plato’s depiction of love as a divine madness (*junūn ilāhī*), for madness is precisely the absence of *'aql*. Madness, however, even the divine sort, is not necessarily a good thing, which is why discussions of love invariably involve all sorts of caveats. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s terms, love without intellect loses sight of *tawhīd*, because *tashbīh* without *tanzīh* insists on immanence and forgets the transcendent One. It causes just as much imbalance and chaos as *tanzīh* without *tashbīh*.

This is not the place to review the many facets of love as explained by theoreticians

like Aḥmad Ghazālī, Muḥammad Ghazālī, Sam‘ānī, and Ibn ‘Arabī.² What is important to note is that talk of love begins with duality, for it demands two lovers, each of whom is simultaneously *‘āshiq* and *ma‘shūq*, and each of whom is aiming for unity. The original lover and beloved is God, and the derivative lover and beloved is the human being. Both lovers and both beloveds are affirmed in the verse, “*He loves them and they love Him*” (5:54), which is quoted more than any other Quranic passage in discussions of love.

When God sent prophets to His beloveds, He did not do so to keep them distant. His goal was to bring them into nearness. As Rūmī puts it in one passage, we were fish swimming in the ocean without knowing that it was water or that we were fish. Then God threw us on dry land, and we flip and flop, calling it “love.” When God pulls us back into the ocean, we will know that we are fish and that He is the ocean [Rūmī 2000: 29]. The same idea plays a prominent role in Rūmī’s famous story of Moses and the shepherd: “O Moses,” God rebukes His prophet, “did you come to bring about union (*waṣṭ*), or to bring about separation (*faṣṭ*)?” [Rūmī 1925–40: 2:1751].

We in the academy should acknowledge that we have come to bring about separation. We aim to establish categories of understanding, theoretical analyses, big pictures, new paradigms, clever classifications, and so on and so forth, all for the sake of whatever it is that drives us. Our methodologies are determined by *‘aql*, a word whose meaning is broad enough to embrace all conceptual schemes and theoretical constructs. In terms of traditional Islamic learning, we fall on the side of the jurists and Kalam experts. We insist on *tanzīh*, for we strive to see clearly by means of separation, analysis, and the just balance. There is no reason to think that love plays any but a peripheral role in this picture. Certainly it can be important if we mean by the word a human emotion, a feeling of empathy toward students and colleagues. But if we mean the *ḥubb* and *‘ishq* discussed by the Ghazālīs, Sam‘ānī, and Rūmī, then our environment is not congenial to the task, to put it mildly.

I cannot pretend to speak for “Sufism.” After all, scholars hardly agree on what the word designates. But I think that I know the writings of Rūmī, Ibn ‘Arabī, and a number of other “Sufis” fairly well. When I ask myself whether those authors would approve of the dissections and analyses that we carry out in the name of Sufi studies, I have serious doubts. I suppose that they would not reject the usefulness of the exercise in principle, but they would certainly remind us that we will never perceive the truth of affairs with the one-eyed vision of *tanzīh*. We will never be able to loosen the fetters of *‘aql* without an *‘ishq* focused on the One.

III. The Alchemy of Love

All this is by way of providing a bit of theoretical, one-eyed elaboration on why I hold that the most important service we can render as scholars of Sufism is to make the subject

2 For love theory before Ibn ‘Arabī, see Chittick [2013a].

available to those who want access to it, not to pile up analysis upon analysis, theory upon theory. For various reasons, some of them misguided no doubt, many people want to know more about “Sufism,” as anyone who has taught a university course on the subject knows. In my own experience, the best way to open the door to the world of Sufi (and Islamic) thought is to provide access to texts, not analyses and descriptions and theoretical musings. And as everyone in the field knows, the vast majority of important Sufi literature has never been translated, or it is badly translated and inadequately explained, so students are too often left with cold, one-eyed interpretations, slanted by the methodological prejudices that are built into academic work.

Sufi texts often remind their readers that scholarly approaches to Islamic learning frequently become ends in themselves—a form of disease well-known in modern academia. Jurists become convinced that all good lies in jurisprudence, devoting their lives to devising rules. Kalam experts never tire of fine-tuning their theories about God and debating among themselves. Shams-i Tabrīzī had these sorts of scholars in mind when he said, “This rope is for people to come out of the well, not for them go from this well into that well” [Chittick 2004: 51].

Muḥammad Ghazālī wrote *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* largely to show that the rope of knowledge was for climbing out of the well. By calling his book “Giving life to the sciences of the religion” he was reminding scholars that, to quote Bāyazīd, “You take your knowledge dead from the dead.” He wanted to show that true knowledge derives from the life of the spirit and that its proper role in human existence is to pull people back to their source. His Persian summary of the *Ihyā’*, *Kīmiyā-yi sa’ādat*, “The alchemy of felicity,” is even more explicit in designating the proper role of knowing. And given that love is the power that bridges gaps and establishes union, only love’s elixir can transmute the copper of acquired knowledge into the gold of the spirit.

Although Ghazālī brilliantly explained the rationale for supplementing *‘aql* with *‘ishq*, his writing is still dominated by the analytical, rational approach, and this resulted in a relatively aloof and abstract style. The genius of his brother Aḥmad and other masters of the Religion of Love lay in their presentation of an alchemical engagement with the One in a concrete language that resonates with beauty. After all, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” Beauty is lovable by definition, and the object of love is always beautiful to the lover. Beautiful language attracts the reader’s love even if the content repels the reader’s *‘aql*. And all love is a bridge to the Reality.

Aḥmad Ghazālī and others take full advantage of imagination’s power to depict the presence of the beautiful Beloved in forms and images, kindling the fire of love in the reader’s soul. Only imagination, not intellect, can present beauty in the external forms of literature, poetry, and song. *Khayāl* provides the fuel for love’s fire. Or, as Rūmī puts it, his poetry

depicts the Water of Life, since we are all thirsty, though usually mistaken about what we are thirsty for: "What is Love? Perfect thirst. // So let me explain the Water of Life" [Rūmī 1957–67: vs. 17361].

Theories of beauty are not beautiful, not even, I suppose, to aestheticists. Authors like Aḥmad Ghazālī and Rūmī wanted to help their audience understand that study and learning will not necessarily aid in the achievement of the goal of human life, which is to dwell in happiness with the Beloved—to overcome separation and achieve union. Acquired knowledge must be put into practice with the aim of increasing thirst, since love alone can burn away the analytical dross that veils the heart.

IV. Metaphorical Others

Poets and theoreticians of love pay a great deal of attention to "jealousy" (*ghayra*), because the problem faced by seekers of the One is precisely the "others" (*ghayr*). God is jealous because He wants His lovers to eliminate the others through *tawḥīd*, the recognition that they have only one true beloved. *'Aql*, however, multiplies the others by differentiation, logical analysis, and academic disputation. It stresses *tanzīh* to differentiate the others from the One. *Khayāl* in contrast sees the others as self-disclosures of the One, taking the stance of *tashbīh* to reintegrate the others into the One. It perceives the beauty of the Beloved everywhere, thus negating the others' independent existence. It brings into actual lived experience the reality of the verse, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). It is the cognitive side of love, burning away otherness and establishing sameness.

The divine attribute of jealousy is closely allied with majesty and severity, for violence must often be done to the others. The Beloved desires the lover's sole attention so that union may be achieved. A vision of *tawḥīd* can only be achieved when God's jealousy erases the others, leaving only the single object of love. As Muḥammad Ghazālī puts it in *Kīmīyā-yi sa'ādat*, the highest stage of *tawḥīd* is that "The person sees only one and he sees and recognizes all as one" [Ghazālī 2001: 800].³ To translate this into Ibn 'Arabī's terms, perfect *tawḥīd* is to see with both eyes simultaneously. It is to establish *tanzīh* with the eye of *'aql*, thus recognizing God in His transcendent Oneness; and it is to affirm *tashbīh*—the divine self-disclosure in all things—with the eye of *khayāl*.

Authors who wrote about the Religion of Love never forgot that all love for others is a metaphor, just as all created beauty is a reflection of divine beauty, for there is nothing truly beautiful but God. Metaphorical love is not bad, for "The metaphor is the bridge to the Reality." Love benefits the soul inasmuch as it pulls it toward the beautiful Beloved. Love for a man or a woman, as Rūmī says, is like a wooden sword that a warrior gives to his son

³ For the parallel passage in *Ihyā'*, see [Ghazālī 1993: 4:360]. The full passages are quoted in Chittick [2013a: 417 and 157].

to prepare him for battle [Rūmī 1957–67: vs. 337]. In the end all love will lead to the One, but the process of eliminating the others will likely be painful, for it will be carried out by the divine severity and jealousy. Sam‘ānī often makes the point that one can never be a lover without suffering, as when he quotes the Arabic saying, “Trial for love is like flames for gold” [Sam‘ānī 1989: 220].

V. Moses and Love

I have just provided an abstract, academic analysis of the relationship between *‘aql* and *‘ishq* in many Sufi texts. What I have said, however, derives from *‘aql*’s rational analysis, and as everyone knows, love is something else. What speaks to most people much more than abstract analysis is the concrete imagery of poetry and song. Theory is suitable for academics, legal nitpickers, and Kalam experts. Story-telling, imagery, and poetry are for everyone. So let me turn the discussion over to Sam‘ānī, a master of poetical Persian who is fully informed of the theoretical issues elaborated upon by the Ghazālīs and others, yet who manages to present the drama of love with imagery that rivals Rūmī and Ḥāfīz. What I am trying to get across is that academic acumen can be combined with burning passion to bring about a remarkable and moving depiction of the fundamental thrust of the Islamic tradition, that is, establishing unity through personal transformation. Whether or not modern-day academics can follow the same path is doubtful, but in order to be true to our texts we need to be aware that this goal lay at the heart of Sufism.

Sam‘ānī pays a great deal of attention to the Quranic accounts of the prophets. It is hardly surprising that he gives Moses a high profile, given that the Quran mentions him by name far more than any other prophet. As the Sufīs were wont to remark, quoting the Prophet, “When someone loves something, he mentions it often.” God’s frequent mentions of Moses are enough to show that He loves him dearly. It follows that there should be elements in his story that have much to teach lovers of God.

The Quran recounts several events in Moses’ life, and Sam‘ānī comments on most of them. Western studies of Sufism most often mention the story of his encounter with Khidr, which is frequently taken as illustrating the superiority of divine unveiling (*kashf*) over juridical knowledge. For this and other reasons, people are accustomed to thinking of Moses as the dry and austere representative of the Shariah (*sharī‘a*) and Khidr as the far-seeing shaykh of the Sufī path, the Tariqah (*tarīqa*).

Sam‘ānī often discusses the complementary and sometimes opposing standpoints of the Shariah and the Tariqah (or the Haqiqah, the “Reality” that lies beyond the metaphor of this world) and on occasion he talks about Moses in these terms. Take, for example, the following passage, in which he contrasts the stance taken by over-zealous Sufīs with that of narrow-minded jurists. The Shaykh al-Islam whom he quotes is his father, Manṣūr Sam‘ānī (d. 1096),

author of a well-known Qur'an-commentary as well as books on Hadith and jurisprudence. The "command" (*amr*) to which he refers is often called the religious (*dīnī*) or prescriptive (*taklīfī*) command. The "decree" (*ḥukm*) is more commonly called the creative (*khalqī*) or engendering (*takwīnī*) command.

Moses was possessor of the Shariah, and Khidr possessor of the Haqiqah. Moses gave news of the command, and Khidr gave marks of the decree. Their companionship did not turn out right, for the lords of the rules cannot put up with the lords of the unveilings.

Shaykh al-Islam used to say, "For thirty years a Sufi and a scholar were put into the same pot. Fire was lit and the water boiled. When they were brought out, both were still raw."

The owners of the outward affairs do not recognize the owners of the inward affairs, but the owners of the inward affairs recognize the owners of the outward affairs. Moses did not recognize Khidr, so he asked to be his companion. Khidr recognized Moses, so he said, "*Surely you will not be able to bear patiently with me*" [18:67] [Sam'ānī 1989: 70].

VI. The Fire of Separation

Talk of love tends to begin with complaints about separation, for love is incomprehensible without the distinction of lover and beloved. The problem faced by the two sides is their distance from each other, and the solution is for them to come together. It is no accident that the first line of Rūmī's *Mathnawī*—a great hymn to love if there ever was one—begins by asking the reader to listen to the tale of separation, which is the necessary concomitant of *tanzīh* and the corresponding divine attributes of severity, majesty, and justice. In contrast, union is the concomitant of *tashbīh*—gentleness, beauty, and bounty. God's beloved Moses was shown the primacy of separation the moment God said to him at Mount Sinai, "*Thou shalt not see me.*" He came to understand that lovers will keep on burning in the fire of separation until nothing is left but the One.

Here is Sam'ānī's summary depiction of Moses as God's beloved:

With a hundred thousand caresses and exaltings, God brought [Moses] into the road—that headman of the registry of the truthful, that verse from the ode of the lovers. God sewed the exalted embroidery of *I chose thee for Myself* [20:41] on the cape of his good fortune, He placed the mole of the prosperity of *I cast upon thee love from Me* [20:39] on the cheek of his limpid beauty, He draped him with the robe of the elevation of *surely I have chosen thee over the people* [7:144], and

He threw the shawl of uncaused beautiful-doing over the shoulders of his innate nature. He sent one hundred twenty-some thousand cups of sealed secrets to his ears in the unmediated speech of the Glorified. He pitched the whole of the earth as the pavilion of his proximity. He conveyed him to a station in which there were God and Moses, Moses and God, but he became confounded when he was addressed in whispered conversation. He became drunk with this wine, so He sent the proximate of the Presence with fans of intimacy to fan him. In the story: "When he heard God's speech, he fainted, so God sent the angels to fan him with fans of intimacy." [Sam'ānī 1989: 135]

In all cases of human love for God and other human beings, it is God's eternal love that leads the way. This is a standard reading of the Quranic verse of mutual love: "*He loves them, and they love Him.*" As Sam'ānī explains,

O dervish, first the station of Mount Sinai began seeking Moses, then Moses began to seek. Otherwise, Moses was carefree. First the station of *two-bows' length away* [53:9] began yearning for Muḥammad's feet, then Burāq was sent to Muḥammad. Otherwise, that paragon's work was all set. First Joseph's beauty came looking for Jacob's love, then Jacob bound the belt of love. Otherwise, Jacob had no awareness of that story. First the beginningless request set out to seek us, then we began to seek. Otherwise, we knew nothing of love's secret. [Sam'ānī 1989: 306–307]

In only one instance does Sam'ānī use the expression "Religion of Love," *madhhab-i maḥabbat*.⁴ He is explaining that the changing states and stations of the human soul are necessary consequences of the complementary divine attributes, which give rise to the ups and downs of love, the joys and sorrows of union and separation. He writes,

When He said, "*Am I not your Lord?*" [7:172], that was the night of running the kingdom. When He said, "*He loves them, and they love Him*" [5:54], that was the time of caressing. In the Religion of Love, both gentleness and severity come forth, both caressing and melting, both being pulled and being killed, both making do and burning. There must be caresses so that a man may know the harshness of being taken to task, and there must be taking to task so that he may recognize the value of caresses. [Sam'ānī 1989: 513]

Those who think that love is all sweetness and light are thinking like merchants. They

4 In three places he uses the expression *shar'-i maḥabbat* or *sharī'at-i maḥabbat* [Sam'ānī 1989: 362, 365].

want to do a little something and reap a nice reward. According to Sam'ānī such people are at best beginners in love. God will treat them gently until they advance on the path. As he puts it, "Benevolence is for beginners. As for the advanced, their possessions are free for the taking and their blood may be shed. The road for them is severity upon severity and trial upon trial" [Sam'ānī 1989: 230]. Or again: "Leniency and mildness are for children. In the road of men, there is nothing but heart-piercing arrows and liver-burning fires" [Sam'ānī 1989: 433].

Sam'ānī often explains why advancing in the path of love brings about increased harshness and severity. He writes for example,

As long as the aim and goal is bounty and bounteousness, bestowal and gifts, the door of response will be open and the sought object will be linked to compliance. But when a man passes beyond this station with steps of seriousness, when he raises the banner of aspiration in the world of love, when he gives a place in his heart to yearning and longing for the station of witnessing and contemplation and the waystation of unveiling and uncovering, then he becomes "a sick man whom no one visits and a desirer who is not desired." Whatever he requests, whatever supplication he utters, whatever story he tells, whatever complaint he narrates — he is presented with "The seeking is rejected, the road blocked." Have you not heard the story of Moses? He was granted so many of his aims and desires, but when he talked about vision, it was said to him, "*Thou shalt not see Me*" [7:143]. Yes, such is the severity of the beloveds, and upon this the road is built. [Sam'ānī 1989: 349]

It follows that if you want to advance in the Religion of Love,

You must stand like a dog at this threshold for a thousand years and become nothing but anticipation, without desire and choice, and perhaps they'll open the door and throw you a bone. ...

What answer is given to dogs? They stand at the door of the shop from morning to night, and then at night the door is shut and a stone is thrown in their face. But a dog will not go away because of a stone.

"O deprived one, from morning to night you sit before the shop with your eyes fixed on the door. Has a day ever come when they threw you a piece of meat?"

The dog says, "No, but they have my beloved in their hands." [Sam'ānī 1989: 432]

Sam'ānī frequently discusses God's refusal to show Himself to Moses. He explains, for example, that there is no reason for God to give this extraordinary privilege to one person:

At the mountain, Moses asked for vision. It was said, "*Thou shalt not see Me* [7:143]. O Moses, there is no stipulation that you be provided for. A hundred thousand poor wretches, estranged from their homes and families, down on their knees, their hearts roasted and their eyes full of tears, offer up their spirits in yearning for My Presence. There is no stipulation that I leave them in their pain and single out one individual for the goal." [Sam'ānī 1989: 297]

Another reason that God did not show Himself was to keep Moses from being destroyed, for his prophetic mission was still ahead of him.

Moses said, "Show me," and he was struck by the blade of the severity of *thou shalt not see Me*. Then a piece of rock received this robe of honor: *When his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain*.

When the vanguards of majesty's blows and the spears of beauty's banners appeared from the world of self-disclosure, the mountain fell to the ground and was effaced in itself, and Moses fell down thunderstruck. When he came back to himself he said, "Lord God, where did the mountain go?"

The address came: "It was effaced and fell into the concealment of nonexistence. O Moses, if I had given you what you wanted, My beauty would not have been diminished, nor would My majesty have been harmed. But instead of the mountain, you would have been effaced by the world of sorrow, and I have work for you to do." [Sam'ānī 1989: 137]

Sam'ānī often takes the position of *tanzīh* and states that God does not show Himself to anyone, even if, in other passages, he talks a good deal about the vision of the Beloved.

Love's road goes forth on severity. At every moment the lover's food is a draft of poison. Here we have Moses, seeking vision, and he was met with rejection. The mountain, however, was provided with self-disclosure, not having sought or asked. It had no excellence over Moses, but beloveds love to burn their lovers' hearts by exalting themselves above them. [Sam'ānī 1989: 433]

In terms of Islamic theology, the severity of love's road expresses the *tanzīh* notion that the Divine Essence will never be seen, for created things will always be held back by the veils of majesty.

Abu'l-Hasan Kharaqānī said, "He cut up the hearts of the sincerely truthful and

melted their livers with waiting, but He gave Himself to no one.”

It came into Moses’ heart, “It is I to whom He spoke.”

The command came, “Strike that stone with your staff.”

He looked and saw a desert within which were a hundred thousand Moseses, in the hand of each a staff, each of them saying, “*Show me*” [7:143] [Sam’ānī 1989: 574].

In short, lovers have nothing to look forward to in this world but hardship. Any pleasantness they may experience will be but a hint of what they are trying to achieve:

He makes all lovers pleased with a scent. He makes them approve of talk, and He gives the reality to no one. There may be a waystation beyond the waystation of Moses, but he wanted to pass beyond speaking. It was said to him, “O Moses, go back to your station. Do you want to reach the station of contemplation from the station of speech?”

No one reached the standing of Moses in burning on the road of the Real, and no one reached the standing of Jacob in burning on the road of creation. “O Moses, here are some words! O Jacob, here is a scent!” [Sam’ānī 1989: 366]

According to a well-known hadith to which Sam’ānī sometimes refers, Muḥammad suffered more trials than any other child of Adam. This is often interpreted to mean that trial and tribulation are marks of God’s love for His beloveds. Sam’ānī had this in mind when he put these words into God’s mouth as a consolation for those afflicted by the trials of love:

“O keepers of this world, have feasts and festivals! O exalted ones, have tribulation and tumult! One group is like that, one group like this. Yes, I give that to anyone, but I do not give this trial and tribulation to everyone. I gave the unfortunate Pharaoh four hundred years of kingship and well-being and did not disturb him. But, if he had wanted the pain, burning, and hunger of Moses for one hour, I would not have given it to him.

“Look at how far the blessings of this world go! That fellow has lifted his head high with a crown—give him a thousand! Then look at how far the violence of My tribulation goes! That one has fallen down—kick him in the head!” [Sam’ānī 1989: 431]

In short, entering the Religion of Love is a sure way to call down pain and suffering. Sam’ānī quotes this saying by an anonymous Sufi: “Recognition is fire, love is fire, and this talk is fire upon fire.” Then he remarks, “It never happens that a place catches fire without tumult and burning” [Sam’ānī 1989: 351].

The vision of God is promised to those who reach paradise in the next world, but no one — least of all any lover — should imagine that he will achieve that vision through his own efforts.

What a marvelous business! He commanded the angels to turn their faces toward dust, and He said to the Adamites, “Turn your faces toward a stone!” What is this? This is to show the worth and level of deeds.

He said to Moses, “*But look at the mountain*” [7:143]. Look at the mountain, for the mountain is a stone, and you are a clod. A stone is worthy of a clod, and a clod is worthy of a stone.

When He gives vision tomorrow, He will give it as a bestowal, not because of worthiness. No eye is worthy of seeing Him, no ear is worthy of hearing His speech, no intellect is worthy of recognizing Him, and no foot is worthy of His road. [Sam‘ānī 1989: 74]

Lovers should not be dismayed that the great Moses was not given vision, since this is good news for the poor and destitute, that is, the rest of us.

If God had fulfilled the hope of Moses, with all his discipline and struggle, then the hearts of the destitute would have been broken. “They would have fancied that gazing on Me is the recompense for deeds. To Moses with all his perfection and the merchandise of his deeds, I said, ‘*Thou shalt not see Me,*’ so that the hearts of the destitute would not be broken....”

Despite all the disobedient acts, ugly deeds, and disgraceful doings of the disobedient servants, the Maker’s gaze on the heart will curtain them. God summoned Moses and gave him the good news of hospitality. But when Moses appeared in the attribute of bold expansiveness, he was refused a look. Thus when the disobedient man, in abasement and brokenness, puts his head on the doorstep of remorse and is singled out for the gaze of gentle gifts, he will be a freeloader on God’s generosity. [Sam‘ānī 1989: 386]

In short, to follow the Religion of Love is to negate one’s own existence and actualize one’s own essential poverty. As Sam‘ānī puts it, “How can it be correct for you to be existent and Him to be existent, for you to have being and Him to have being? *God is the Unneedy, and you are the poor* [47:38]” [Sam‘ānī 1989: 165].

It follows that God’s answer to Moses can be understood as the necessary consequence of the lingering existence of otherness in a created thing. According to Sam‘ānī, God said to Moses,

“O Moses, have you brought along your own eyes that you say ‘*show me*’? Now that you have come with eyes, We have made your eyes wellsprings of blood and— by virtue of the uncaused Will that has always been— We will make you gaze on a rock.”

O chevalier, why would He show you His always-having-been? Rather, He will show you to yourself in your own attribute of never-having-been. As long as a mote of you is left, He will cast upon you the veil of the mountain. [Sam‘ānī 1989: 136–37]

God’s gaze on the mountain destroyed it, but His gaze on the hearts of His lovers brings them to life.

When He spoke to Moses, He spoke in the shade of His gentleness. If He had spoken to him in the attribute of tremendousness, he would have melted at the first step such that no name or mark of him would have remained.

What a marvelous business! Mount Sinai received the self-disclosure and crumbled. Hearts receive the self-disclosure and at every moment increase in agitation, rejoicing, and freshness. Yes, when Mount Sinai became the locus of the gaze, it came back to itself and did not have the capacity to put up with it. When hearts become the locus of the gaze, they do not become so through themselves. They become so through His attribute: “The hearts are between two fingers of the All-Merciful.” [Sam‘ānī 1989: 418]

In typical fashion for Sufi authors, Sam‘ānī often reminds his readers that they should understand every verse in the Quran as referring back to their own souls. As for the story of Moses, it tells of the constant interplay between God’s gentleness and severity within every human lover.

Wherever there is a heart, there is a Moses; and wherever there is a breast, there is a Mount Sinai. The Moses of the heart went to the station of speech on the Mount Sinai of the breast, sometimes on the packhorse of light, sometimes on the steed of shadows. [Sam‘ānī 1989:419]

You should not fancy that there is only one Mount Sinai and one Moses in the world. Your body is Mount Sinai and your heart Moses. The food of your heart is *surely I, I am God* [28:30]. If He was not jealous for the hearts, by God the heart would not be the heart! ... What is this? The severity of love. Kindness is shown to Qur’an-reciters and night-risers, but no kindness is shown to any lover. [Sam‘ānī 1989: 614]

God is jealous for hearts because He created the heart to love Him alone. The function of His severity is to eliminate love for others.

“His love came and burned away everything else.” When His love comes, it strikes the fire of jealousy into the haystack of gazing on others.

“A naked heart, within it a shining lamp!” Exalted is the heart that has no room for others!

A body is wanted, tamed by the commandments. A heart is wanted, contemplating the command. A spirit is wanted, drunk with the wine of holiness in the session of intimacy. A secret core is wanted, standing on the carpet of expansiveness and empty of all being. A radiance of the light of gentleness is wanted, shining from the Mount Sinai of unveiling, snatching you like Moses away from all others and setting you down in the station of contemplation and the domicile of struggle. [That light] will remove the *shoes* [20:12] of gazing on the two worlds from your feet, snatch the *staff* [20:18] of disobedience from your hand, and bring you to the *holy valley* [20:12] and the unqualified bush. It will make you drunk with spirit-mingled and repose-inducing wine, and every moment it will call out to the hearing of your secret core, “*Surely I am God* [20:14]. It is I who am I. If anyone says ‘I am,’ I will break his neck. Even if you are not jealous of your own thoughts, aspiration, and resolution, I in My Lordhood am jealous.” [Sam‘ānī 1989: 201]

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