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# Universal Dimensions of Islam

*Studies in Comparative Religion*

*Edited by*  
Patrick Laude

World Wisdom



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# The Koran as the Lover's Mirror

William C. Chittick

It is well known that Sufism places a premium on love, but Western observers rarely associate love with Islam itself. This no doubt helps to explain the tendency to see Sufism as somehow tangential to the tradition. I would argue rather that love for God is every bit as central to the Islamic perspective as it is to a tradition like Christianity, though the rhetorical stress is by no means the same. In the present context, one piece of evidence will have to suffice: Islamic praxis is based on following the Sunnah of Muhammad—that is, imitating his conduct, his customs, and his character traits. The Koran is of course utterly basic to Islamic ways of seeing and doing things, but the Koran is known and interpreted first of all through the manner in which it was embodied and acted out by Muhammad. Following the Prophet provides the parameters for the Muslim understanding of the Koran and of all things. But what exactly is the rationale for following the Prophet? A most succinct expression is found in surah 3:31: "Say [O Muhammad!]: 'If you love God, follow me, and God will love you.'" If you do not love God, there is no reason to follow the Prophet. This has hardly been lost on practicing Muslims.

If it is not obvious to outsiders that Muslims have been motivated by love for God, this has something to do with the many directions in which Islamic civilization developed—literature, law, art, philosophy, theology, political institutions. Modern scholarship has been much more interested in these observable aspects of culture than in psychological or spiritual motives. Nonetheless, most scholars recognize that Islamic civilization has always been concerned with unpacking the teachings of the Koran and applying them to diverse realms of human endeavor. In other words, expressions of Islamic civilization and culture flesh out the ways in which people imitate the Prophet, who embodied the Koran. And Muslims in turn are motivated to imitate the Prophet by love for God and the desire to call down God's love upon themselves.

Although Muslims have followed Muhammad in order to attract God's love, they have also recognized that God loves human beings in any case. Sufi authors commonly highlight the notion that the divine motivation for creating the universe is love. What makes human beings special, among all God's creatures, is that they have the capacity to love God freely in response to His love for them. All other things simply serve God as they were created to serve Him, with no free choice on their parts.<sup>1</sup> As Rūmī puts it,

Choice is the salt of worship—  
the spheres turn, but not because they want to.  
Their turning is neither rewarded nor punished,  
for, at the time of reckoning, choice bestows excellence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Theologically, this distinction is often drawn in terms of God's two commands: He issues the command "Be!" (*kun*) to all things, and they can do nothing but obey; this is the creative or "engendering" command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*). To human beings (and jinn) he also issues the command, "Do this and don't do that," and they accept or reject it on the basis of their own free choice; this is the "prescriptive command" (*al-amr al-taklīfī*).

<sup>2</sup> *Mathnawī* (Nicholson edition), Book 3, vss. 3287-88.

So, to say that God created the universe out of love means that the divine love brings into existence the ugly along with the beautiful, the bad along with the good. Only within the context of such an apparently mixed-up universe can free choice have any meaning. And only those who choose freely to love God can love Him with worthy love. If love were to be coerced, it would not be love. This is one reason why the Koran says "There is no compulsion in the religion" (2:256). The religion—the right path taught by the Koran and the Prophet—is precisely to live up to the requirements of love for God and to do so by putting the Sunnah into practice. If the religion were coerced, it would not be love, and it would not be the religion.

In short, although God loves human beings and created them to love Him, they are free *not* to love Him. So, a second sort of divine love responds to the free choice of human beings to love God, a choice that demands following the divine guidance as embodied in the prophets. And, God says in the often cited *ḥadīth qudsī*, "When I love My servant, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks." When love reaches its culmination, the divine Lover is none other than those he loves, and the human lovers are none other than the divine Beloved. This is one of the meanings that Sufis see in the verse, "He loves them, and they love Him" (Koran 5:54).

\* \* \*

I chose to talk about the Koran as a "mirror" because I wanted to stress the role of the interpreter in understanding scripture. The fact that people see the Koran through their own specific lenses is especially clear when one surveys the vast number of Koranic commentaries written over the centuries—not to mention the critiques and studies written by non-Muslims. Jurists have found in the Koran a book of law, theologians see all sorts of God-talk, philosophers find the guidelines for wisdom and virtue, linguists uncover fascinating intricacies of Arabic grammar, biologists find theories of life. As for Western scholarship, nothing is more obvious than that scholars reach different conclusions on the basis of diverse premises and prejudices.

When I first chose the topic for this paper, I immediately put into the relevant file a statement from the *Maqālāt* of Shams-i Tabrīzī, Rūmī's famous companion. In that book we learn that Shams used to make his living as a teacher of the Koran. He tells us repeatedly that the path to God is that of following (*mutāba'at*) the Prophet—having in mind, of course, the already mentioned Koranic verse, "If you love God, follow me." In one explanation of the central importance of the Koran, he says,

For the travelers and the wayfarers, each verse of the Koran is like a message and a love-letter [*ishq-nāma*]. They know the Koran. He presents and discloses the beauty of the Koran to them.<sup>3</sup>

I suppose that nowadays not too many people read the Koran as a love-letter. But, is this because of the contents of the Koran? Or is it because of the contents of the readers' souls? Shams thinks the answer is obvious: "The flaw is that people don't look at God with the gaze of love."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Chittick, *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

The issue is not only interpretation of scripture, of course, since the same argument applies to our views on everything. Our understanding of the world and of our own role within it depends on where we are coming from. And with even more reason, how we understand "God" depends on who we are. This should be obvious—everyone has a different understanding of the word "God." Ibn 'Arabī, the "Greatest Master" of Sufi teachings, makes the point by arguing that absolutely no one can worship God as such. All people without exception worship the god or gods of their beliefs (*al-ilāh al-mu'taqad*). Given that the term "god" can designate the point of reference for one's attitudes and activities, even those who claim not to worship any gods are deceiving themselves. All of us have points of reference and orientations.

I do not want to claim that interpretation of scripture is totally subjective, but it does seem clear that scripture has the capacity to allow people to see into their own souls. When people read scripture, they find themselves. If they do not like what they are seeing, they should—in the traditional way of looking at things—try to dissolve the knots in their souls that prevent them from seeing the beauty of the Divine Word. Needless to say, the modern response is somewhat different.

\* \* \*

One needs to remember that Muslims never considered the Koran a book among other books, any more than the Bible was simply a classic for Christians. The Koran was the Word of God, God's own self-expression with the purpose of guiding those whom He loves. People read and recited the Koran not to entertain themselves with old stories, nor to edify themselves, but to bring themselves into conformity with the divine reality that is disclosed in the text. The purpose of engaging with the Koran was to transform the soul. Reciting the text and conforming oneself to its teachings was a way to express one's love for God and to make oneself worthy for God's love.

The idea that reciting the Koran and observing the Sunnah are transformative goes back to Islamic teachings about what it means to be human, teachings with which the Koran is saturated—that is, if one is looking for them. People can become transformed because they can come to know God and love Him, and this is possible because human beings are not fixed in their status. It may be true that the God whom people worship is always the God of belief, and it may also be true that God in Himself is always beyond the capacity of created beings to understand. But, this does not mean that the God of my belief today is the same as the God of my belief tomorrow, quite the contrary. Understanding and worship of God change constantly in keeping with the growth and development of the human self.

Ibn 'Arabī points out that the uniqueness of human beings goes back to the fact that they cannot be pinned down. Just as God cannot be defined, so also the creatures whom He created in His own image cannot be put into a box. In other words, the "definition" of what it means to be human has everything to do with indefinability.

In the Koran, the angels say, "Each of us has a known station" (37:164). This suggests that the angels are all different and that each has a specific function. None of the angels can do the job of any other angel. Ibn 'Arabī argues that the rule expressed in this verse applies to all created things; each thing in the universe is exactly what it is meant to be and is doing precisely what it was created for—with the partial exception of human beings. In their case, human status depends upon not having a fixed station in this life, because only nonfixity can allow for



freedom. People can develop and grow as they attempt to make themselves worthy for God's love.

Humans, in short, cannot be defined in any more than a general way. No one can know what he or she really is, because each of us is a work in progress. What we do in our daily activities constantly brings about changes in our psychic and spiritual make-ups. We remain indefinable until death, at which point we enter into our own fixed stations, like the angels and other creatures.

When we apply the rule of nonfixity and indefinability to our own beliefs and practices—whether these be religious or non-religious—we see that our understandings, words, and deeds are always in the process of changing, for better or worse. Moreover, we reap the fruits of these changes—the law of karma is ineluctable. Reality itself holds us responsible for what we think and do. Death is simply the point at which all this becomes obvious.

Given that people are constantly developing and changing, they should be concerned with making sure that they develop in a worthy and congenial way. Love for God provides the necessary focus. Following the Prophet, one needs to remember, does not simply mean performing certain acts. More than anything else it means assuming certain attitudes toward God and the world.

Islam provides the basic guidelines for the proper attitudes in the testimony of faith, the Shahadah: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is God's messenger." I have already indicated something of the importance of God's Messenger for actualizing love. The role played by the first Shahadah is less obvious, but in fact, the declaration of divine unity—*tawhīd*—is in some ways even more basic.

The statement "There is no god but God" is typically considered an expression of belief. For Muslims, it is more like a statement of fact, or a self-evident truth. Even more than that, it is a methodology. Specifically, it responds to the human limitation of always seeing God and scripture in our own measures, and it provides the means to bring our measures into conformity with God's measure. Given that our beliefs and attitudes alter and change day by day and even moment by moment, we need a method of focusing, training, and guiding them and allowing them to develop in a direction that will lead to long-term happiness.

The first Shahadah provides a way of thinking about God. What it basically says is that every thought about God needs to be negated. Whatever god we conceive of is not God in Himself, who alone truly is. Whatever interpretation we make of the Koran—which is God's self-expression—does not live up to the reality of God. There can be no definitive and final answers in our minds and souls. To say definitive and final is to say "absolute," and God alone is absolute, God alone is definitive and final. As Shams puts it, "It is God who is God. Whatever is created is not God—whether it's Muhammad or other than Muhammad."<sup>5</sup> The definitive and final God is not the God that we can understand. Our God of our beliefs is always tentative.

In other words, the Shahadah provides a method to help people avoid trying to size up God. The great lovers of Islamic civilization say that if people want to understand God in God's measure, they need to look upon Him with the eye of love and strive to conform to His wishes. As a methodology for lovers, the Shahadah tells them that there is nothing worthy of love but God, because God alone is adequate to the ever-changing and unlimited substance of the hu-

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

man soul. God alone can fill up the divine image that is the human self. As for what is less than God, love for it is legitimate and desirable only to the degree in which the object of love is recognized as God's good and beautiful face (*wajh*) shining in the created realm. The principle of unity demands that all things be seen as signs and marks of God's goodness.

\* \* \*

There is a hadith that can help us understand the role of love in interpreting the Koran: "Your love for a thing makes you blind and deaf." A typical way of reading this is to say that loving what is less than God makes people blind and deaf to the guidance provided by the Koran and the Sunnah. This will have ill consequences for the soul because, if people love something other than God, they will not follow Muhammad, and then God will not love them and will not bring them into His proximity after death.

This saying, however, can be read in other ways as well. We can take it not as a criticism of misguided love, but as a statement of fact concerning all love, guided or misguided. Love for the ugly and vicious makes people blind and deaf to the beautiful and the virtuous, and love for the beautiful and good turns them away from the ugly.

If we acknowledge that love makes us blind, it becomes obvious that all scriptural interpretation is inadequate. Why? Because every interpreter loves something, some god, some principle, some goal. And the love that drives us—the love for whatever it is that we worship—makes us blind and deaf to other gods and other loves. If our god is history, or psychology, or physics, for example, this would make us blind and deaf to metaphysics, not to mention "mysticism." This is obvious; we meet it in every facet of life, especially life in the academy. People not only do not see things the same way, they *cannot* see things in the same way, because they are blinded by their loves.

So, every interpreter of scripture is a lover—of something or other—and every lover sees scripture as his own mirror. For those who love the God of *tawhīd*, the God described in the first Shahadah, their love makes them blind and deaf to every negative attribute that might be applied to God, for they can only see that He is adorned with every positive attribute. Love makes them give all credit for good to God, and all credit for evil to ourselves.

If human beings were fixed in status like other creatures, it would be a waste of breath even to mention the fact that they are blinded by their loves and obsessed by their own interpretative stances. It is precisely because we are not fixed in status and are constantly changing that we need to remember our own limitations. We can always strive to lift our gazes higher and see through better lenses.

\* \* \*

I am not arguing, by the way, that "love for God" is necessarily a good thing. That all depends upon the god of belief. If the god of belief does not conform with God as He truly is, what people call "love for God" can easily be hatred for the Beautiful, the Good, and the True. This is one reason that Islamic texts never divorce love for God from knowledge of God. Real faith cannot be a leap into the unknown, because it is impossible to love something that you do not know. This is the problem, precisely: we cannot know God in Himself, so we can only love Him in the degree that we know Him. It becomes all important to expand our own measure

in knowledge and understanding so as to achieve as close an approximation as possible to the divine measure.

In texts that discuss love for God, the expression “lover” and “knower” are often synonyms. Or, if love is taken as higher—as is done typically in Sufi poetry—knowledge becomes the means for achieving true love. Al-Ghazālī often makes the connection between love and knowledge in his *Iḥyāʾ*. He does so, for example, in a passage found at the beginning of a section on the heart's illness, mentioned in the Koran:

Every part of the body was created for its own specific act. The illness of each part is for it not to be able to perform the act for which it was created, or to perform the act but in a disrupted manner. The illness of the hand is for it not to be able to grasp. The illness of the eye is for it not to be able to see.

In the same way, the illness of the heart is for it not to be able to perform the specific act for which it was created. This act is knowledge, wisdom, recognition, love for God, worshiping Him, and taking joy in remembering Him. The heart should prefer these over every other desired thing and utilize all desires and all bodily parts in this path. . . .

So, in each bodily part there is a benefit, and the benefit of the heart is wisdom and knowledge. This is the specific characteristic of the human soul through which human beings are distinguished from the beasts. For, they are not distinguished from them by the power of eating, sexual intercourse, eyesight, and so on—only through knowing things as they are. And the Root of things, the one who brings them into existence and devises them, is God. It is He who made them things. So, if a man were to know all things but not to know God, it would be as if he knew nothing.

The mark of knowledge is love. He who knows God loves Him. The mark of love is that he does not prefer this world or any other loved thing over Him. . . . Whenever anyone loves something more than he loves God, his heart is ill. It is as if his stomach loved clay more than it loved bread and water, or as if it ceased to have any desire for bread and water. Hence, the stomach is ill, and this is the mark of its illness.

Thus it is known that all hearts are ill, except as God wills.<sup>6</sup>

\* \* \*

I can sum up in these terms: Love for God pushes the lover to follow the Prophet, who embodies the message of the Koran. One cannot love God properly, however, without knowing God, and to know God one needs to have a sound knowledge of God's self-expression, which is precisely the Koran and its embodiment in Muhammad. In order to know and understand the Koran correctly, one needs to read it with the eye of love. As an interpretive method, love demands that the reader look at God in terms of the Shahadah, which negates every blame-

<sup>6</sup> *Iḥyāʾ ulūm al-dīn*, Volume 3, Book 2, section on “The marks of the illnesses of the hearts” (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1992, vol. 3, pp. 96-97).

worthy attribute from God and ascribes every praiseworthy attribute to him. This demands that interpreters understand every verse in the best light—in view of the real nature of God’s wisdom, compassion, mercy, and guidance.

\* \* \*

All these remarks are meant to provide a brief introduction to my favorite Koran commentator, one of those who treated the Koran as a love-letter. This is Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, who was a contemporary of al-Ghazālī. His commentary has not been well known to Western scholarship, perhaps because it is written in Persian. He took inspiration from ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī, a scholar of Hanbalī jurisprudence who wrote a number of classic Sufi texts in both Arabic and Persian and who died about forty-five years before Maybudī completed his commentary in 520/1126.<sup>7</sup>

The commentary is called *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddat al-abrār*, “The unveiling of the secrets and the provision of the pious.” It is one of the longest commentaries in the Persian language, though, like many classical Persian texts, a good percentage of the book is in fact in Arabic. For many centuries, it was one of the best known and most popular commentaries on the Koran wherever Persian was a significant language of learning. It was published in ten volumes in the 1950s.

Maybudī’s commentary has a unique arrangement. The author takes ten or so verses at a time, and then explains their meaning in three stages. In the first stage, he provides a literal Persian translation. In the second, he offers grammatical clarifications, explains the circumstances of the revelation, and gives detailed accounts of interpretations provided by the Prophet, the Companions, and other commentators. In the third stage he chooses one or more of the verses and suggests something of their more inner meanings. He follows the path of what has commonly been called commentary by “allusion” (*ishāra*). Literally, the word means “to point.” Technically it designates a meaning that is not expressed directly but needs to be brought out by reflection and meditation. In this third stage he demonstrates how the Koran addresses the dynamics of spiritual development and the unfolding of the human soul. Love, of course, comes up repeatedly.

The first two stages of the book are written in a style that is dry, precise, and sometimes pedantic. In contrast, the third stage provides some of the most beautiful examples of early Persian prose and, in contrast to the other two sections, frequently cites Persian and Arabic poetry and often quotes the words of Anṣārī. Here I will look at the third-stage commentary on three verses. It should be kept in mind that these three passages represent a tiny fraction of the explanations by “allusion” that are offered in the ten volumes.

The first passage pertains to the second verse of the second surah. The first verse of the surah is simply the enigmatic letters “*alif lām mīm*,” concerning which diverse interpretations have been offered, some of which Maybudī cites. The second verse is translated by Arberry in this way: “This is the book, wherein is no doubt, a guidance to the godfearing.”

In stage two of the commentary Maybudī follows the typical reading by explaining that the

<sup>7</sup> I first wrote these sentences before the appearance of Annabel Keeler’s ground-breaking study, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur’an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), which throws a great deal of light on Maybudī and his work.

verse refers to the Koran. In stage three, however, he looks for allusions. He takes the word *kitāb*, which is usually translated as “book,” in its literal sense, which is “writing.” He understands the verse to say, “This is the writing wherein is no doubt.” He then explains the meaning in terms of two other Koranic verses where writing is mentioned. Then he offers a brief meditation on the verse:

It is said that “This is the writing” is an allusion to what God has written against Himself for Muhammad’s community: “Surely My mercy takes precedence over My wrath.” God does that in His words, “Your Lord has written mercy against Himself” [6:54]. It is also said that the verse is an allusion to the faith and knowledge that God has written upon the hearts of the believers. Thus He says, “He wrote faith in their hearts” [58:22].

In this verse, it is as if God is saying, “My servant, I have written the outline of faith in your heart, I have mixed in the perfume of love, I have decorated paradise for you, I have adorned your heart with the light of knowledge, I have lit up the candle of union with Me, I have stamped the seal of kindness on your heart, and I have written the characters of love in your awareness.”

“He wrote faith in their hearts”: [God is saying,] “I wrote in the Tablet,<sup>8</sup> but what I wrote there was only your description. I wrote in your hearts, and what I wrote there was only My description. I wrote your description in the Tablet, and I showed it to Gabriel. I wrote My description in *your* heart. Would I have shown it to an enemy?

“In the Tablet I wrote your cruelty [*jafā*] and faithfulness [*wafā*]; in your heart I wrote laudation and knowledge. What I wrote about you has not changed. How could what I wrote about Myself change?

“Moses carved out a stone from the mountain, and, when I wrote the Torah therein, the stone turned into emerald. The knower’s heart was made of harsh stone—when I wrote My name therein, it turned into an exalted book.”<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

The next verse is the first half of 2:148, which reads, “Everyone has a direction to which he turns.” This is often understood as explaining the diversity of creation. In stage two of the commentary, Maybudī reads the verse as referring to the “kiblah” of people, their orientation in their worship. Each of us has a god on which our aspirations are focused, and that god is determined by our created nature, which was given to us by our Creator. This idea is commonplace in Islamic thought, and is alluded to in Koranic verses like 25:43, “Have you seen the one who has taken his own caprice as his god?” I have already explained how Ibn ‘Arabī develops some of its implications in terms of “the god of belief.” Here are Maybudī’s words in stage two:

<sup>8</sup> This is of course the Guarded Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), within which God writes with the Highest Pen (*al-qalam al-a’lā*). The Pen and Tablet are also known as the First Intellect and the Universal Soul.

<sup>9</sup> *Kashf al-asrār*, edited by ‘A. A. Hikmat (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1952-60), vol. 1, pp. 54-55.

Everyone has a kiblah toward which he turns. The folk of falsehood have turned their faces toward a crooked kiblah—by [God's] decree and abandonment. The folk of truth have turned their faces toward a straight kiblah—by [God's] decree and giving success. And the whole affair is in God's hand.<sup>10</sup>

In this straightforward interpretation, Maybudī takes the verse as a statement of the actual situation, of the static relationship between creatures and the Creator. But our situations are not in fact fixed, so we can always do something to change them. The fact that we are abandoned today does not demand that we will be abandoned tomorrow, nor does the fact that we receive success today mean that we have a lock on success. If we look with the eye of love, we can see that the verse is urging us to recognize our true Beloved and turn away from all the false objects of love that attract us. This is the way Maybudī interprets it in the third stage:

He [God] says by way of allusion: "All people have turned away from Me. They have become familiar with others instead of Me. They have made the ease of their hearts to lie in something less than Me and accepted it as their beloved."

You, who are the nobles on the Path, you, who claim to love Me—lift up your eyes from anything less than Me, even if it be the highest paradise. Then you will walk straight, following the Sunnah and the conduct of Muhammad, and you will fulfill completely the duty of emulating that greatest man of the world. For, his conduct, as the greatest of the prophets, was to turn his eyes away from all beings and not to see any refuge or to accept any resting place other than the shelter of Unity [*aḥadiyyat*].

When a man wears down his soul in the path of love  
he'd better not incline to anyone less than the Friend.  
In the path of love the lover must never  
give a thought to paradise or hell.

When someone puts himself right by following [Muhammad], the candle of his love for God will be lit in his path such that he will never fall away from the road of love. To this is the allusion in the verse, "Follow me, and God will love you" [3:31]. Whenever someone goes straight on the avenue of love, he will be secure from the varied directions that are the kiblans of the shallow-minded. One fervent lover has said in his state,

No matter that I don't have the world's kiblah—  
my kiblah is the Beloved's lane, nothing else.  
This world, that world, all that exists—  
lovers see the Beloved's face, nothing else.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

Al-Ḥallāj alluded to the kiblāhs of the shallow-minded when he said, “The desirers have been turned over to what they desire.” In other words, everyone has been placed with his own beloved.

The reality of this work is that all creatures have claimed love for the Real, but there was no one who did not want to be *somebody* in His court.

Whoever found himself a name found it from that Court.  
Belong to Him, brother, don't think about anyone else!

Since everyone claimed to love the Real, He struck them against the touchstone of trial to show them to themselves. He threw something into them and made it their kiblāh, so they turned their face to it, rather than to Him. In one it was possessions, in another position, in another a spouse, in another a beautiful face, in another vainglory, in another knowledge, in another asceticism, in another worship, in another fancy. He threw all of these into the creatures, so they busied themselves with them. No one spoke of Him, and the path of seeking Him stayed empty.

This is why Abū Yazīd said, “I walked up to His gate, but I didn't see any crowding there, because the folk of this world were veiled by this world, the folk of the afterworld were veiled by the afterworld, and the claimants among the Sufis were veiled by eating, drinking, and begging. There were others among the Sufis of a higher level—but they were veiled by music and beautiful faces. The leaders of the Sufis, however, were not veiled by any of these. I saw that they were bewildered and intoxicated.”

It was in accordance with this sort of tasting that the Guide on the Path [Anṣārī] said, “I know the drinking place, but I'm not able to drink. My heart is thirsty and I wail in the hope of a drop. No fountain can fill me up, because I'm seeking the ocean. I passed by a thousand springs and rivers in hope of finding the sea.

“Have you seen someone drowning in fire? I'm like that. Have you seen someone thirsty in a lake? That's what I am. I'm exactly like a man lost in the desert. I keep on saying, ‘Someone help me!’ I'm screaming at the loss of my heart.”<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

I conclude by citing one more passage, again from the commentary on the second surah, specifically verse 5. At the beginning of this surah, after saying that the Koran is the book within which there is no doubt, the text goes on to say that it is a guidance for the godfearing, and then it describes the godfearing—those who have faith in the unseen and perform the commanded practices. Verse 5 then reads, “Those are upon guidance from their Lord; those are the ones who prosper.” The next verse turns to a description of those who do not prosper—those who reject God's guidance.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 412-13.

In the third stage of his commentary on verse 5, Maybudī goes into quite a bit of detail to suggest what sort of “prosperity” is at issue:

Here you have endless good fortune and unlimited generosity. God has opened up the door of their insight and has looked upon their hearts with the gaze of solicitude. He has lit up the lamp of guidance in their hearts so that, what for others is unseen, for them is manifest, what for others is reports, for them is unmediated seeing.<sup>12</sup>

Next Maybudī turns to accounts of the Prophet’s Companions and some of the early Sufis to suggest the difference between knowing something by means of transmitted reports, and knowing it by means of direct vision and immediate experience. Then he turns once again to the sayings of Anṣārī and cites a highly poetical dialogue between the spirit (*jān*) and the heart (*dil*), which concludes by reminding us that all this talk of love and transformation represents *tawhīd* in practice, and it leads to the union in which God becomes the hearing with which the lovers hear and the eyesight with which they see.

The human substance is like a rusted mirror. As long as it has rust on its face, no forms appear within it. When you polish it, all forms will appear. As long as the opaqueness of disobedience is on the believing servant’s heart, none of the mysteries of the spiritual realm [*malakūt*] will appear within it, but, when the rust of disobedience is removed from it, the mysteries of the spiritual realm and the states of the Unseen begin to show themselves. This is precisely the “unveiling” [*mukāshafa*] of the heart.

Just as the heart has unveiling, the spirit has unmediated seeing [*mu’āyana*]. Unveiling is the lifting of the barriers between the heart and the Real, and unmediated seeing is seeing together [*ham-didārī*]. As long you are with the heart, you are receiving reports. When you reach the spirit, you arrive at unmediated seeing.

Shaykh al-Islām Anṣārī has let out the secret here in the tongue of unveiling, lifting from it the seal of jealousy. He said:

On the first day of the beginningless covenant a tale unfolded between heart and spirit. No one was there—not Adam and Eve, not water and clay. The Real was present, the Reality was there.

No one has heard such a marvelous tale. The heart was the questioner, and the spirit was the mufti. The heart had an intermediary, but the spirit received the report by unmediated seeing. The heart asked a thousand questions from the spirit, and they all came to nothing. With one word the spirit answered them all.

The heart did not have its fill of asking, nor did the spirit of answering. The questions were not about deeds, nor were the answers about rewards. Whenever the heart asked about reports, the spirit answered from unmediated seeing. Finally, the heart came to unmediated seeing, and it brought back the report to water [and clay].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 58.



If you have the capacity to hear, listen. If not, don't hurry to deny, just stay silent.

The heart asked the spirit, "What is faithfulness [*wafā*]? What is annihilation [*fanā*]? What is subsistence [*baqā*]?"

The spirit answered, "Faithfulness is to bind the belt of love, annihilation is to be delivered from your own selfhood, subsistence is to reach the reality of the Real."

The heart asked, "Who is the stranger, who the mercenary, who the familiar?"

The spirit replied, "The stranger has been driven away, the mercenary remains on the road, the familiar is called."

The heart asked the spirit, "What is unmediated seeing? What is love [*mīhr*]? What is unneedingness [*nāz*]?"

The spirit replied, "Unmediated seeing is the resurrection, love is fire mixed with blood, unneedingness is the handhold of need [*niyāz*]."

The heart said, "Add to that."

The spirit answered, "Unmediated seeing does not get along with explanation, love is paired with jealousy [*ghayrat*], and wherever there is unneedingness, the story is long."

The heart said, "Add to that."

The spirit replied, "Unmediated seeing cannot be analyzed, love takes the sleeper in secret, and he who reaches unneedingness in the Beloved will never die."

The heart asked, "Has anyone ever reached that day by himself?"

The spirit replied, "I asked that from the Real. The Real said, 'Finding Me is by My solicitude [*ināya*]. Thinking that you can reach Me by yourself is your sin.'"

The heart asked, "Is there permission for one glance? I'm tired of interpretation and reports."

The spirit replied, "Here we have a sleeper, running water, his fingers in his ears. Will he hear the sound of the Pool of Paradise?"

The discussion of heart and spirit was cut off. The Real began to speak, and the spirit and heart listened. The tale unfolded until the words rose high and the place was emptied of listeners.

Now the heart finds no end to unneedingness, and the spirit none to gentleness. The heart is in the grasp of Generosity, the spirit in the shelter of the Holy. No mark of the heart appears, no trace of the spirit. Nonexistence is lost in existence, reports in unmediated seeing. From beginning to end this is precisely the tale of *tawhīd*. To this "I am his hearing with which he hears" gives witness.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60. I have taken a bit of help in reading this passage from parts of it that are also found in *Majmū'a-yi rasā'il-i fārsī-yi Khwāja 'Abdallāh Anṣārī*, edited by M. Sarwar Mawlāī (Tehran: Tūs, 1377/1998), pp. 367-77.