

The Pivotal Role of Love in Sufism

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Mount Sinai, New York,
United States of America / *Stati Uniti d'America*
November / *Novembre* 2008

Most scholars who speak of Islamic “esotericism” have in mind the strain of thought and practice that others call “mysticism” or “spirituality”. I prefer the Arabic-based “Sufism” (*taṣawwuf*), not least because the term clearly needs to be defined. Nonetheless, if esotericism is understood in its etymological sense, i.e., “that which pertains to the more inward”; or as having the characteristics enumerated by Antoine Faivre for the Western tradition – such as a theory of correspondences and the notion that true knowledge is the fruit of an inner transformation – then the term can certainly be an appropriate label for a good deal of what has been called Sufism over Islamic history. To make sense of Sufism as the “more inward” side of the Islamic tradition, however, we need to situate it in relation to Islam’s more outward, exoteric teachings.

Islam was founded by the revelation of the Koran to Muhammad, and all schools of Islamic thought have drawn constant inspiration from the Koran and the Hadith (Muhammad’s sayings). Both of these sources have a good deal to say about God, His relationship with the universe, the human soul, prophets, human destiny, proper behavior, and other such issues, but neither provides anything like systematic theology, law, philosophy, or Sufism. Such names should rather be applied to various interpretative schools that gradually

became established over the first few centuries of Islamic history. Among these, law or jurisprudence (*fiqh*) has an “exoteric” orientation, which is to say that it deals with the outward and apparent manifestations of human behavior by detailing the ritual and social obligations set down in the Koran and the Hadith. Scholastic theology (*kalām*) also takes a relatively exoteric approach, since it codifies and rationalizes the sources’ creedal statements about God, creation, prophecy, and eschatology. Philosophy (*falsafa*) addresses the same basic topics (God, the universe, the destiny of the human soul) with a more esoteric orientation, avoiding dogmatism and making free use of the Greek heritage, not least Plotinus and the Corpus Hermeticum. As for Sufism, it has always acknowledged the importance of an exoteric foundation – right praxis and right understanding – but it stresses the inward goal of transforming the soul by bringing it into harmony with the Supreme Reality.

As for “love”, it is one of several words that Sufis have used in their attempts to elucidate the nature of the soul’s transformation. The word is especially appropriate because it escapes all attempts to give it an outward, descriptive, creedal analysis. This is clear to anyone who has been “in love”. Only those who experience love know it, just as only those who actually find the more hidden realities within themselves truly understand them. As the frequently cited Arabic proverb puts it, “He who has not tasted does not know” (*man lam yadhuq lam yadrī*).

1. The Testimony of Faith

Islamic thought begins with the dual testimony (*shahāda*) of faith, “(There is) no god but God, and Muhammad is God’s messenger”. The first half of this testimony is known as the sentence of *tawhīd*, “asserting unity”, that is, the unity of God. The Koran tells us that *tawhīd* was taught by all prophets (traditionally numbered at 124,000, beginning with Adam himself): “We never sent a messenger before

thee”, God says in the Koran, “without revealing to him, ‘There is no god but I, so worship Me’” (21:25). In other words, every prophet was given a message of *tawhīd* along with instructions on to how live in conformity with it: “To each of you [prophets], We appointed a law and a way” (5:48).

Exoteric Islam, as formulated by jurisprudence and scholastic theology, has tended to give pride of place to the second testimony of faith, “Muhammad is God’s messenger”. This results in a relatively particularized and exclusivist reading of the Koran and Hadith, emphasizing the outward, apparent meaning. Both schools of thought claim to provide authoritative guidance on the basis of correct transmission of the message, even if correct interpretation has been a constant issue. God is understood primarily as the absolute ruler, king, and master, and human beings are discussed as subjects, servants, and vassals, whose duty is to “submit” (*islām*) to the contents of the message and to acknowledge the authority of the scholars who speak on its behalf.

In contrast, esoteric Islam has tended to stress the first testimony, “No god but God”. It has looked at *tawhīd* not as a dogma to be believed but a truth to be understood and interiorized. This has resulted in perspectives that are relatively universal and inclusivist and less tightly bound up with Koranic formulations. True understanding of God’s unity depends not on the acceptance of a creed, but rather on achieving an inner clarity of vision. This is not to deny that esotericism, like exotericism, takes the prophet Muhammad as the model of human perfection. In exoteric Islam, however, the goal is to follow the Prophet’s Sunnah (habit, wont), understood to mean the manner in which he put the revelation into practice, as explained and interpreted by scholars who possess a mastery of the law (*ijtihād*). The technical term for the role of the believer is then “imitation” (*taqlīd*), that is, following the authoritative guidance of the scholars. Esoteric Islam adds that praxis and creedal statements are simply the beginning of the task. In fact, the goal of all teaching

and all practice is to harmonize the soul with its divine prototype, the “form” (*ṣūra*) in which God created Adam. In both Sufism and philosophy, conformity with the divine form demands a transmutation of the soul, commonly called “realization” (*taḥqīq*), a term that is contrasted with “imitation”. Imitation is made mandatory by the exoteric scholars, whose realm is setting down guidelines for orthopraxy and orthodoxy. Realization, however, cannot be imposed by fiat, for it depends on awakening to the truth of Unity.

Muslim theological and philosophical thought has typically demonstrated *tawḥīd* by showing how all things are rooted in and governed by a single Ultimate Reality. Discussions of God as the First Real or the Necessary Being depict Him as acting in the “cosmos” (*al-‘ālam*), defined as “everything other than God”, by virtue of His own essential characteristics, called “names and attributes”. Among these are life, consciousness, desire, power, speech, generosity, and justice – attributes that are true and real in God, but contingent in everything else. The sentence of *tawḥīd*, “No god but God”, means that there is no life but God’s life, no wisdom but God’s wisdom, no forgiveness but God’s forgiveness, no compassion but God’s compassion. When these qualities are found in ourselves and others, they can only be loans from the Creator, or reverberations of the divine light.

2. Love

Theologians, philosophers, and Sufis generally acknowledge that love is essentially indefinable, but they also offer working definitions and cite the many ways in which the word has been used, frequently adding long lists of near synonyms¹. The great Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) depicts the two extremes of love’s meaning with the

¹ See L. A. Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1971), Part 2, Ch. 3. Despite its title, this book has a good deal to say about divine love, which was never forgotten by the “profane” authors.

line, “For the elect, love is a tremendous eternal light, for the commoners, form and sensuality”².

According to the tenth-century philosophical school known as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, the best of the many definitions that have been proposed for love is “intense yearning for unification”³. The notion of unification (*ittiḥād*) or union (*wiṣāl*) has remained central to the discussion. Take, for example, this more elaborate definition offered by Sa’id al-Dīn Farḡhānī, an influential Sufi scholar of the thirteenth century: “Love is an inner inclination toward reaching a perfection. Its reality is a unitary, intermediating relationship between the seeker and the sought. Its meaning is the domination of what brings about unification and sharing between the seeker and the sought, and it demands and effectuates the disappearance of what brings about distinction and difference.”⁴

Love, then, is an intense yearning for unification, and it is both a divine and a human quality. It lies outside the competence of the jurists, who can speak only about right and wrong activity. It was rejected by most of the scholastic theologians, who insisted that God’s utter transcendence nullifies the possibility of love between man and God in any sense of the word that might also apply to inter-human relationships. It was embraced by the Sufis, who considered it the heart of Islam and saw it as the means to realize the full significance of *tawḥīd* – not only transcendence, but also immanence. Certainly God is majestic, wrathful, and inaccessible, but He is also beautiful, merciful, and present. The Prophet set the tone for the Sufi vision of God’s loving embrace when he said that the inscription on the Divine Throne reads, “My mercy takes precedence over My wrath”. Mercy and love demand nearness, which has the original and final say in the existence of the cosmos. The Koran quotes God as saying, “My mercy

² *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1957–67), verse 18197.

³ *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 3, 272.

⁴ Farḡhānī, *Mashāriq al-darārī*, ed. S. J. Ashtiyānī (Tehran: Anjuman-i Islāmī-yi Hikmat wa Falsafa-yi Irān, 1979), 17.

embraces everything" (7:156), which helps explain why, "Wherever you turn, there is the face of God" (2:115). In other words, "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4). The difficulty of the human situation arises from the fact that, despite His nearness to us, we are distant from Him. The esoteric path aims at overcoming the distance.

3. Love's Tenfold Reality

In talking about love, the Koran uses two words more or less synonymously, *wudd* and *ḥubb*, though several other Koranic words have similar meanings, including mercy (*raḥma*), desire (*irāda*), and munificence (*jūd*). A third word for love, *ishq*, becomes prominent in later discussions, not least because it connotes an intense, overpowering love. The Koran calls God *al-wadūd*, which means both "lover" and "beloved". The later literature prefers derivatives of the word *ḥubb*, calling Him *al-muḥibb*, lover, *al-maḥbūb*, beloved, and *al-ḥabīb*, lover/beloved. Referring to God by any of these names acknowledges a relationship, but love in itself transcends duality, so the word is often used to designate the unitary Divine Essence. Al-Daylamī (d. ca. 1000), author of the earliest Arabic book on love with a Sufi orientation, makes the point like this: "The root of love is that God is eternally described by love, which is among His abiding attributes [...]. He loves Himself for Himself in Himself. Here lover, beloved, and love are a single thing without division, for He is Unity (*aḥadiyya*) Itself, and in Unity things are not distinct."⁵

Throughout the literature on divine love, authors take one or both of two basic standpoints, the first of which is ontological, the second moral and ethical. From the first standpoint, love is analyzed in terms of the statement of *tawḥīd*, "No god but God", and is seen as inherent in all things. From the second standpoint, it is analyzed not in terms of how things are, but in terms of how they should be, so the

stress is on the guidance that is epitomized in the second testimony, "Muhammad is God's messenger". In respect of ontology, love is a universal force that brings all things into being; in respect of morality and ethics, it provides specific guidelines for right activity and right attitudes.

The relationship between these two standpoints can be understood in terms of the word "command" (*amr*), which the Koran uses to designate both an ontological and a moral imperative. Theologians find mention of the ontological imperative, which they call the creative or "engendering" command (*al-amr al-takwīnī*), in several verses, such as, "His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be!', and it comes to be" (36:82). Everything obeys this command by the very fact of its existence. The moral imperative, called "the prescriptive command" (*al-amr al-taklīfī*), can be seen in the many verses that specify right activity and sound attitudes, such as, "Surely God commands justice, acting beautifully, and giving to kinsmen, and He forbids indecency, dishonor, and insolence" (16:90).

The engendering command expresses the reality of *tawḥīd*, the fact that there is no creator, no speaker, and no source of existence but God. The prescriptive command expresses the reality of God as Guide (*al-hādī*) and Law-giver (*al-shāri'*), the fact that He sends prophets for the sake of leading people to salvation. Those addressed by the ontological imperative – i.e., everything in the universe – have no choice but to obey it, but those addressed by the moral imperative – i.e., human beings and jinn, including Satan – have the possibility of saying "No" to it (though not to the ontological imperative). The Koran refers to this exceptional capacity of human beings in the verse, "Have you not seen how to God bow all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and many of mankind?" (22:18).

Texts that explain God's love deal with four basic issues. Allusion is made to all four of them in the most commonly cited Koranic verse mentioning the word: "He loves them, and they love Him" (5:54). In

⁵ al-Daylamī, *Kitāb 'atfal-alifal-ma'lūf'ala'l-lām al-ma'tūf*, ed. J. C. Vadet (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1962), 36 f.

other words, God is (1) a lover whose (2) beloved is man, and man is (3) a lover whose (4) beloved is God. Each of these statements can be read as an implication of either the engendering command, or the prescriptive command, or both. This gives us eight ways of talking about love, all of which are presupposed by God's identity with love in His original unity (the first way of discussing love). A tenth way to speak about love comes into focus as soon as we remember that the goal of lovers is union or unification, which is the re-establishment of unity.

4. The Ontological Imperative

4.1 *God as Lover*. "He loves" means that God is lover, and *tawhīd* applied to this name means, "There is no lover but God". If love is "intense yearning for unification", then it presupposes difference and separation, which is to say that the very notion of love implies a relationship between two different things. From one point of view, exemplified by the passage quoted from al-Daylamī, the object of God's love is God Himself, so there is no real duality. Authors like Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), the greatest of the Sufi theoreticians, acknowledged the truth of this position but also addressed the question from other standpoints. For example, they often explained divine love in terms of *wujūd*, a standard designation for the Ultimate Reality from the time of Avicenna (d. 1037). The word is typically translated as being or existence, but etymologically it designates finding, consciousness, and joy; thus, it corresponds roughly with the Sanskrit expression *sat-chit-ananda*, Being-Consciousness-Bliss.

Ibn 'Arabī reminds us that "No god but God" means that there is no true being but *al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*, "the Real Being". Inasmuch as this Being is lover, It yearns for unification with Its beloved, which has no existence other than as a possibility (*mumkin*) of manifestation latent in Its own Being. In fact, says Ibn 'Arabī, love is always oriented toward that which has not yet been achieved. As he puts it,

"Love never becomes attached to anything but the nonexistent thing, that is, the thing that does not exist at the moment the attachment is made"⁶.

When God's love attaches itself to a nonexistent thing "before" its creation, He issues the command, "Be!", and it comes into being, thereby gaining a certain mode of identity or "unification" with the Real Being Itself, the only Being that truly is. Since the thing now "exists" – in a manner of speaking – and since love never becomes attached to an existent thing, God's love attaches itself to the next moment of its existence. This is Ibn 'Arabī's well-known doctrine of "the renewal of creation at each instant" (*tajdīd al-khalq fi'l-ānāt*)⁷. In short, God is by definition a lover, and His love for things bestows on them the appearance of existence in the cosmos, what is commonly called their "relative" (*nisbī*) or "metaphorical" (*majāzī*) existence.

Another way to address God's creative love is to analyze the Koran's use of the word *rahma*, a word that is typically translated as mercy, compassion, or benevolence. Etymologically, it designates the quality of a womb (*rahīm*), so it appears most plainly in a mother's love for her child. We already know that "God's mercy" – His loving, motherly side – "takes precedence over His wrath", which is to say that His fundamental nature is love, compassion, and benevolence. The basic difference between love and mercy is that the first is mutual and the second unidirectional: God has mercy on human beings, but not vice-versa.

The notion that God is fundamentally merciful appears most obviously in the formula of consecration, which mentions the name God along with two names derived from the same root as *rahma*: "In the name of God, the All-merciful (*al-raḥmān*), the Ever-merciful (*al-raḥīm*)". In commentaries on the ninety-nine names of God (a common genre), these two names are typically mentioned right

⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), 2, 327.

⁷ See the chapter "The Divine Roots of Love", in W. C. Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

after the name God itself, and a great deal of attention is devoted to explaining why God calls Himself by two different names that are grammatically synonymous. Commonly it is said that the All-merciful designates God inasmuch as He loves all beings without exception, and the Ever-merciful refers to a more specific love (about which more will be said shortly). This explains why Ibn 'Arabī tells us that the universe itself is nothing but “the Breath of the All-merciful”, which is to say that it is God’s engendering command “Be!”, articulated and deployed as the infinite words that are the creatures. In light of His name All-merciful, to ask why God created the universe is like asking why a mother loves her children. In God’s case, the very fact of love results in the existence of the beloved; the very fact of mercy results in the articulation of the creatures in the Divine Breath.

4.2 *Man as Beloved*. “He loves *them*”, which is to say that God’s love is directed specifically at human beings. In discussions of the object of love, beauty (*jamāl*, *ḥusn*) plays a prominent role, not least because the Prophet said, “God is beautiful, and He loves beauty”. As Ibn 'Arabī’s explains, “Beauty causes love, for beauty is loved by its very essence”⁸. *Tawḥīd* teaches that “There is none beautiful but God”. When God loves, He is loving beauty, and He alone is truly beautiful, so He loves His own beauty reflected in contingent things. The Prophet said that God created man in His own form, and the Koran says that God is described by “the most beautiful names” (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). It also says, “He made everything He created beautiful” (32:7) and, addressing man, “He formed you, and He made your forms beautiful” (40:64). Thus God created the universe and human beings out of love for His own beauty, which is reflected in their forms. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), one of the most influential theologians, Sufis, philosophers, and jurists in Islamic history, put it this way: “He is the All, and nothing else [truly] exists. When someone loves only himself, his acts, and his compositions, his love does not

⁸ *Futūḥāt*, 2, 326.

transgress his essence and the concomitants of his essence inasmuch as they are connected to his essence. Thus, God loves only Himself.”⁹

In a certain respect, one can say that Islamic anthropology is founded on the parallelism between “He loves beauty” and “He loves them”. God loves human beings because of the unique manner in which they encapsulate and reflect the divine beauty, which embraces all the perfections of His “most beautiful names”. They alone were created in the form of the divine all-comprehensive beauty, and they alone were taught “all the names” (Koran 2:31). This is why God commanded the angels to bow down before Adam (2:34) and appointed him and his children as His vicegerents (2:30, 35:39). All other creatures were created as preconditions for the existence of God’s beloved.

Man’s unique status is commonly explained in terms of a famous saying of the Prophet, according to which David asked God why He created the universe. God replied, “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures that I might be recognized”. The human role is epitomized by the word “recognition” (*ma'rifa*), often translated as “gnosis”. When God taught man the names, He gave him the ability to recognize Him in the entirety of His Reality and the fullness of His creative manifestation, not simply in the traces and properties of a limited number of attributes. This is a typical theme of Sufi literature. Farghānī summarizes it in these terms: “The root of love is the reality of ‘I loved to be recognized’. The lover is the One Divine Essence, and the beloved is the complete appearance and total manifestation of the perfections of the divine names. The perfect mirror of this beloved per se can be nothing but the human reality, in both form and meaning. This is because the human reality has a perfect all-comprehensiveness and a complete correspondence and receptivity [*vis-à-vis* God], and all other creatures fall short of this. This point is alluded to in the often quoted

⁹ *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1993), 4, 474.

divine words addressed to Muhammad, 'But for thee, I would not have created the spheres'.¹⁰

This brings us to another basic theme of the esoteric literature: God created the universe for the sake of Muhammad. This is because Muhammad, in his pre-creational reality, is identical with "the Reality of Realities" (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā'iq*), the germ of manifestation, the archetype of both the universe and man. In Christian terms, this "Muhammadan Reality" (*al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyya*) is the Logos – that through which, by which, and for which all things were created. It follows that Muhammad is God's supreme beloved, because his existence involves the full deployment of the Hidden Treasure and its full recognition by the most perfect human being.

4.3 Man as Lover. Read in terms of the engendering command, "they love" means that human beings were created to be lovers – they cannot not love. At the same time, "There is no lover but God", so the root and source of human love is God's love. As Ibn 'Arabī puts it, "The love of some parts of the cosmos for other parts derives from God's love for Himself"¹¹. In a similar way Rūmī puts these words into the mouth of the Creator: "What place is man's farm plot – within which grows the crop of flesh and skin and bones – for these aspirations and desires? These desires are My pure attributes... 'I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized'."¹²

One of the most common terms used to explain innate human love is "poverty" (*faqr*), which is also a typical designation for Sufism. Its meaning is understood in terms of the Koranic verse, "O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Rich, the Praiseworthy" (35:15). In other words, human beings are empty of reality and beg to be filled, for nature abhors a vacuum. "The poor" – the Sufis – differ from others not in the fact of their poverty, but in their awareness of

¹⁰ Farḡhānī, *Mashāriq*, 606–7.

¹¹ *Futūḥāt*, 2, 114.

¹² *Majālis-i sab'a*, ed. T. Subḥānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Kayhān, 2000), 118 f.

their own nothingness and their recognition that they are driven in everything they do by love and "need" (*iftiqār*, *niyāz*).

4.4 God as Beloved. "They love Him" means not simply that people love by definition, but also that they love God by definition. They cannot love anything else because, in the last analysis, all "others" are simply manifestations of God's beauty, or traces and properties of His names and attributes. The Koran sometimes refers to the engendering command as God's "decree", as in the verse, "When He decrees something, He says to it 'Be!' and it comes to be" (3:47). Another verse says, "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him" (17:23). The exoteric theologians take this verse as a prescriptive command, but Ibn 'Arabī points out that it is also an engendering command, referring to man's innate and unavoidable love for God: "None but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover – and there is no existent thing that is not a lover. So, all the cosmos is lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him. In the same way, no one is worshiped but Him, for worshipers never worship anything without imagining divinity within it. Otherwise, they would not worship it. Thus God says, 'Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him'."¹³

Rūmī often discusses man's innate love for God, saying, for example, "All the hopes, desires, loves, and affections that people have for different things – father, mother, friends, heavens, earth, gardens, palaces, knowledge, activity, food, drink – all these are desires for God, and these things are veils"¹⁴. If people do not recognize their true beloved, it is because of the forgetfulness that has been inherent to the human species ever since "Adam forgot" (Koran 20:115). This brings us to the role of the prophets, which is to remind people of what they have forgotten and to help them awaken to their true Beloved.

¹³ *Futūḥāt*, 2, 326.

¹⁴ *Fīhi mā fīhi*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), 35.

5. The Moral Imperative

5.1 *God as Lover.* To say that love motivates the engendering command is to say that God created the universe for the sake of love. To say that it motivates the prescriptive command is to say that God provides external, prophetic guidance and internal, intellectual guidance because of His love for beauty. We see a reference to this two-sided guidance – and to the role of exotericism and esotericism in the Islamic tradition – in a saying by the early master of all branches of Islamic learning, Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), the sixth Imam of the Shi'ites: “God has two arguments against the people – an outward argument [*ḥujja zāhira*] and an inward argument [*ḥujja bāṭina*]. The outward argument is the prophets, messengers, and Imams; the inward argument is people's intelligence”.¹⁵

In loving beauty, God is not simply loving the beauty of external phenomena – which are among the least real of the divine manifestations – but also the beauty of the invisible qualities that populate the realm of life and consciousness. To the extent that the early theologians acknowledged God's love for human beings, they understood it to demand obedience to the divine law¹⁶. The Prophet said, however, “God looks not at your bodies or your external forms, but He looks at your hearts”, your interior qualities, your intentions and inner life. External conformity to the Law without internal acquiescence to the Real is called “hypocrisy” (*nifāq*) and is considered the worst of all moral failings.

Just as God's creative love is seen as identical with the all-encompassingness of the divine mercy, so also His guiding love is seen as identical with a specific mercy directed toward those who live up to their innate beauty. In the first case, God is designated as the All-merciful, in the second as the Ever-merciful. The All-merciful loves all without distinction – the rain falls on both the good and

¹⁵ al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1968), 25.

¹⁶ J. N. Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 56 ff.

the bad – but the Ever-merciful loves those who do good works. Ibn 'Arabī sometimes calls these two mercies the mercy of free gift and the mercy of obligation. God gives the first freely to all, but He makes the second obligatory upon Himself for those who acknowledge Him as their Lord. The Koran refers to both sorts of mercy in the verse, “My [first] mercy embraces everything, but I shall prescribe it [i.e., in the second case] for those who are god-fearing and pay the alms, and those who indeed have faith in Our signs, those who follow the Messenger” (7:156). It is this second mercy, many theologians agree, that is received by the inhabitants of paradise, but not by those of hell.

5.2 *Man as Beloved.* In light of the engendering command, to say that man is God's beloved means that God created the universe so that human beings could recognize and love Him. In light of the prescriptive command, it means that He instructs people how to live up to their status as divine beloved, much as parents offer guidance to their children. On the one hand, He loves man unconditionally; on the other, His love is conditioned by man's response to it. The Koran refers to its conditionality in the verse, “Say [O Muhammad!]: ‘If you love God, follow me, then God will love you’” (3:31)¹⁷. Islamic praxis – following the prescriptive command – is epitomized as observing the Prophet's Sunnah for, as the Koran tells us, “You have a beautiful model in God's Messenger” (33:21). Muhammad should be

¹⁷ There is a certain homology between the Koranic notions of love and remembrance (*dhikr*), not least because the Koran speaks of God's remembering man as conditional upon man's remembering God: “Remember Me, and I will remember you” (2:152). This verse (and several others) provides the rationale for the practice that differentiates Sufis from most other Muslims, that is, “invocation” as the word *dhikr* is often translated in this context – a practice that is sometimes compared to Hindu *japa*. *Dhikr* plays an important role in the Koran, not least because it and cognate words also designate the function of the prophets, which is “reminder.” Other verses make clear what happens when people forget God. For example, “They have forgotten God, so He has forgotten them” (9:67); “Do not be like those who forgot God, so He made them forget their own selves” (59:19). One should also keep in mind that “forgetfulness” is the closest Islamic concept to “original sin”, and failure to remember God is sufficient cause for damnation.

followed because he is God's beautiful beloved. If people follow him, they also can become worthy of God's love. The Koran explains what this worthiness entails in many verses that speak of love. Thus it says that God loves those who do what is beautiful (2:195), who repent (2:222), who have trust (3:159), who are just (49:9), and so on. It also says that God does *not* love the wrongdoers, (3:140), the workers of corruption (5:64), the transgressors (5:87), the immoderate (7:31), the treacherous (8:58), the proud (16:23), the boastful (31:18). The reference in all these verses is to the soul's inner beauty or lack thereof. After running through these verses, Ibn 'Arabī comments, "No one acquires any attribute that God mentions as causing His love except by following the Prophet"¹⁸.

Al-Ghazālī and others call the achievement of worthiness for God's love "becoming characterized by God's character traits" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). Ibn 'Arabī says that this is the very definition of the Sufi path, the goal of which is to eliminate ugly character traits and to acquire beautiful character traits, or to "purify the soul" (*tazkiyat al-nafs*, from Koran 91:9)¹⁹. To the degree that purification is achieved, love's fruit becomes manifest, which is to say that lover and beloved come together as one. In a sound hadith frequently cited in Sufi literature, the Prophet quotes God as saying that, when His servant approaches Him through performing good works (that is, by following the prescriptive command), He will come to love him. Then, "When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he holds, and the foot with which he walks". This is precisely the goal of the esoteric path: union or unification.

In short, God loves those who become characterized by His beautiful character traits. He Himself is love, and His mercy and forgiveness take precedence over His wrath and vengeance. It follows

¹⁸ *Futūḥāt*, 2, 341.

¹⁹ W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 283.

that the predominant character traits of His beloveds are love, mercy, and compassion toward all of creation. This is why God addresses Muhammad, His supreme beloved, with the words, "We sent you only as a mercy to the worlds" (21:107). From this point of view, encouraging human beings to "love their neighbors" without encouraging them to love God and become characterized by His character traits is to ignore the nature of things.

5.3 Man as Lover. The engendering command means that human beings cannot not love. The prescriptive command awakens them to their innate love and inborn need. It guides them to acknowledge their own poverty and emptiness in preparation for opening up to God. Rūmī constantly encourages his readers to recognize their innate love and to do everything in their power to increase it. These verses are typical:

Without need, the Exalted God
would not bestow anything on anyone.
If the universe had had no need,
the Lord of the worlds would not have created the earth [...].
The noose of all existent things is need:
A man's instrument is the extent of his need.
So, O needy one, quickly increase your need!
Then the Sea of Bounty will boil with generosity.²⁰

5.4 God as Beloved. In light of the engendering command, the only object of love is God, for "There is none beautiful but God", and every lover, wittingly or unwittingly, loves the divine beauty, whose signs and traces appear in people and things. In light of the prescriptive command, people need to recognize who it is that they really love. This is why Rūmī and others distinguish between true

²⁰ *Mathnawī*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1925–40), Book 2, verses 3274–75, 3279–80.

and metaphorical love. True love recognizes God as its object, but metaphorical love gets tripped up by appearances. This is not to say that it is false, simply that it is immature, for its lack of inner vision prevents it from seeing that, as the Arabic proverb has it, "The metaphor is the bridge to the Reality". Rūmī makes the point succinctly:

Love is an attribute of God, who has no needs –
 love for anything else is a metaphor.
 The beauty of the others is gold-plated:
 outwardly it is light, inwardly smoke....
 Those with eyes turn their love to the Mine of Gold,
 each day their love increasing.
 The mine has no partner in its goldness –
 hail, O Mine of Gold! In You there is no doubt.²¹

6. Final Unification

The goal of love is unification, which is the logical outcome of Islam's foundational axiom, the assertion of unity: There is no god but God, there is no lover but God, there is no beloved but God. Pushed to its final conclusion, *tawhīd* leaves nothing but the One.²² What then is love? The energy that establishes *tawhīd* and unifies lovers. Rūmī explains this point while comparing the "no" of the formula, "No god but God", to a sword that cuts away illusion:

²¹ *Mathnawī*, 6, 971–72, 979–80.

²² For example, al-Ghazālī, at the beginning of Book 35 of his classic *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, "Revivifying the Sciences of the Religion", explains in some detail that there are four levels of *tawhīd*, the first of which is simply the recitation of the transmitted words, "No god but God." The second and third levels involve increasing interiorization of the meaning of the sentence. The fourth and final level demands the actualization of a visionary state in which "There is nothing present but the One." For a free translation of the passage, see D. Burrell, *Al-Ghazālī: Faith in Divine Unity & Trust in Divine Providence* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2001), 10 ff.

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
 burns away everything except the Everlasting Beloved.
 It drives home the sword of "no" in order to slay other than God.
 Look closely – after "no" what remains?
 There remains "but God", the rest has gone.
 Bravo, O great, idol-burning Love!²³

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²³ *Mathnawī*, 5, 588–90.