

# The Religion of Love Revisited<sup>1</sup>

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I take it for granted that Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī – not to mention countless other teachers, Muslim and non-Muslim – looked at human beings as works in progress. Many of them would have been happy to call the path of becoming fully human ‘the religion of love.’ Given that such a religion has been claimed by both Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī, I thought it would be useful to review its basic tenets.

No doubt the best-known mention of the religion of love in Islamic literature comes in the line that was brought to the attention of Western readers in 1911 when R.A. Nicholson published and translated Ibn ‘Arabī’s short *divan*, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, the ‘Interpreter of Desires’: ‘I practice the religion of love, wherever its camels turn their faces. / This religion is my religion and my faith’ (my translation). Rūmī says similar things in a number of verses. One example can suffice:

My religion is to live through love –  
life through the spirit and head is my shame.<sup>2</sup>

1. Paper delivered at the Ibn ‘Arabi Society conference, ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi: Being Fully Human,’ Graduate Theological Union, San Francisco, May 3, 2013.

2. *Mathnawī*, Book 6, verse 4059 (Nicholson edn). For a few more examples, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 196, 213, 316. It is worth noting that Rūmī and other Persian writers employ a number of more or less synonymous expressions for ‘religion of love.’ For ‘religion’ they may use *dīn*, as Ibn al-‘Arabī does, *madhhab* (used technically to designate a school of jurisprudence), *Shari‘a* (which is used broadly to mean religion and narrowly to mean the body of rules defined by jurisprudence), and Persian *kīsh* or *ā’in*. For ‘love’ poets usually use Arabic *‘ishq*, not *ḥubb*, though prose writers use both, as well as other words like Persian *mīhr* and *dūstī*. On words for love, see Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. xxiv–xxvi.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s poem has been cited by numerous scholars and devotees to illustrate his universalism. As Nicholson says in the preface to his edition of the poem, it expresses ‘the Sūfī doctrine that all ways lead to the One God.’<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the moment we try to situate this line within the historical context generally and the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī specifically, it becomes apparent that Nicholson may have been jumping to conclusions. Certainly, many of those who have quoted the poem over the subsequent years have had no idea what Ibn al-‘Arabī was talking about.

It needs to be mentioned that ‘the religion of love’ is not part of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s standard vocabulary, even though he often talks about religion (*dīn*) and love (*ḥubb*). He does not use the expression in his enormous *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, but when we look at what he says about the two concepts and combine that with his commentary on the poem, it is not difficult to see what he had in mind. We will discover that he stands in a long line of teachers who spoke in similar terms. To support this contention, I want to precede my remarks on the poem with a few earlier examples of the phrase or its equivalents. I will cite passages from Persian works with which Ibn al-‘Arabī was certainly not familiar to make one of my points: ‘the religion of love’ was part of the cultural ambience. It was not something suddenly put forth by Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī.

I will cite passages from three earlier authors. First is ‘Abdallāh Anṣārī, a famous Hanbali theologian and Sufi from Herat who died in the year 1088, one hundred years before Ibn al-‘Arabī began to write. Among his many books is the classic Arabic description of the path to God, *Manāzil al-sā’irīn*, ‘The Way Stations of the Travelers.’ It is one of a handful of books that Ibn al-‘Arabī mentions in the *Futūḥāt*,<sup>4</sup> and his direct disciple, ‘Afīf al-Dīn Tilimsānī, wrote a commentary on it. Anṣārī was also

3. *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1978), p. xi.

4. For a mention of Anṣārī’s book, whose author Ibn al-‘Arabī calls al-Hirawī (‘the man from Herat’), see *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo, 1911), vol. 2, p. 290, line 9.

one of the greatest early masters of Persian prose, most famous for his exquisite *munājāt* or ‘whispered prayers.’ The second author is Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, who wrote a ten-volume Persian commentary on the Quran in the 1130s. The third is Aḥmad Sam‘ānī, who died in the year 1140, twenty-five years before Ibn al-‘Arabī’s birth. He left us with what is probably the longest and most comprehensive explanation of divine love in Persian, though it is ostensibly a commentary on the names of God.<sup>5</sup>

### BASIC TENETS

The extensive literature on divine love in Arabic and Persian deals with three broad themes, each of which was discussed with reference to one basic passage from the Quran or the Hadith.

The first theme is that love permeates the three realities that are of concern to human beings, namely God, the universe, and the human self. The Quranic verse that is typically cited to show this reads, ‘He loves them, and they love Him’ (5:54). This is understood to mean that God is both the lover of human beings and their beloved. It was read as a statement of *tawḥīd*, that is, the doctrine of divine unity that is epitomized in the words ‘No god but God.’ One of the first implications of this verse is that there is no true lover but God and no true beloved but God.

As is well known, Ibn al-‘Arabī explained *tawḥīd* in many ways, perhaps most famously in terms of *wujūd*, that is, being or existence, a word that had come to prominence with the philosophy of Avicenna. *Wujūd* was so basic to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings that later scholars summarized his position with the expression *wahdat al-wujūd*, the unity of being, even though he never mentioned such a doctrine. By talking in terms of *wujūd*, he was saying that there is no true existence but God, and that the existence of everything else is derivative. There was

5. For details on these three authors and their contributions to Sufi teachings, see Chittick, *Divine Love*.

nothing new in this idea; what was new was the explanation of the reality of *wujūd* in voluminous detail with reference to the Quran and the Sunna.

A basic implication of God's monopoly on true being is that we as creatures cannot claim to have any real existence. This is not only a central theme of Ibn al-'Arabī, but also of Rūmī and the three earlier authors just mentioned. Sam'ānī summarizes it in these terms:

After coming into existence the creatures are just as captive to His power as they were before existence. When they are in non-existence, they are captive to power. If He wants, He brings them into existence, and if He does not want, He does not. Once they exist, they are still captive to power. If He wants to keep them, He does, and if He does not want, He does not. After their existence they will be exactly what they were in the state of nonexistence. And He, having bestowed existence, is exactly what He was before bestowing existence. So, the existence of creatures right now is similar to nonexistence, and their subsistence has the constitution of annihilation.<sup>6</sup>

Both Sufis and philosophers commonly say that the final cause of our existence – no matter how feeble it may be – is God's love for us. His love is eternal, which is to say that it lies outside of time. This love has been present forever and will remain forever. It has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Him. In one of his many discussions of God's eternal love, Sam'ānī says,

In the Beginningless the approval of *He loves them* was busy with *they love Him* without your intervention. Today you have being, but you are far from the midst.

By the right of the Real! The food of hearts and souls is His Being. Otherwise, no one would ever find subsistence. Tomorrow, when all find subsistence in that abode, they will not find it through their own being. They will find it through the food of His

6. Aḥmad Sam'ānī, *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā' al-malik al-fattāḥ*, edited by Najīb Māyil Hirawī (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī wa Farhangī, 1368/1989), pp.415–16; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.14.

Being. If someone in this abode were to reach the stage where his food is the contemplation of His Being, death would be forbidden to him.<sup>7</sup>

Anṣārī often makes similar points in his whispered prayers. This is typical:

O God, I am happy that at first I was not but You were. The fire of finding was mixed with the light of recognizing You, and You stirred up the breeze of proximity from the garden of union. You poured down the rain of solitariness on the dust of mortal nature and burned water and clay with the fire of friendship, thus teaching the recognizer's eyes how to see You.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the first tenet of the Religion of Love is that God loves man unconditionally, outside of any causality whatsoever. Nothing we do can have any effect on this eternal love.

As soon as we turn to the second half of the verse of mutual love – ‘they love Him’ – we see that man's love for God is not as straightforward as God's love for man. Many if not most people show no signs of loving God. This is because the predominant characteristic of Adam's children is forgetfulness. If not, why did God bother sending 124,000 prophets? So, even though people love God by ontological necessity, they are not necessarily aware of the true object of their love. As a result they become dispersed in love for this and that.

One of the many causes of dispersion is alluded to in a famous hadith that is frequently cited in the literature: ‘God is beautiful, and He loves beauty.’ The Quran tells us that ‘He made beautiful all that He created’ (32:7). As a result, all things are beautiful, and since ‘God loves beauty,’ all things are the objects of divine love. Or again, the Quran says, ‘He formed you, so He made your forms beautiful’ (40:64). God created people in His own form. Like Him they are beautiful and they love beauty. Necessarily, the beauty of their forms attracts God's love

7. Sam‘ānī, *Rawḥ*, p.534; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.424.

8. Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddat al-abrār*, edited by ‘Alī Aṣghar Hikmat, 10 volumes (Tehran: Dānīshgāh, 1331–39/1952–60), vol. 5, p.94; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.131.

– though their created beauty can be nothing but the radiance of the uncreated, divine beauty, so in effect He is loving Himself. When people love – and they cannot not love – the object of their love can be nothing but the reflected beauty of God. Rūmī in particular highlights this theme, frequently discussing it in terms of the contrast between real love (*‘ishq-i ḥaqīqī*), which is love that sees through appearances and focuses on the Real Being, and metaphorical love (*‘ishq-i majāzī*), which gets caught up in superficial and transitory beauty.<sup>9</sup> In one verse, he addresses God like this:

The universe is a mark of the comeliness of Your  
beauty!

The goal is Your beauty. All the rest is pretext.<sup>10</sup>

In a passage often quoted in the secondary literature, Ibn al-‘Arabī makes the same point by explaining that everyone and indeed, every single thing, loves 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, the universe is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him... No one loves anyone but his own Creator, but he is veiled from Him by love for Zaynab, Su‘ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world.<sup>11</sup>

The general inability of human beings to perceive the true object of their love leads to the second basic tenet of the Religion of Love. Although God loves human beings unconditionally, He also loves them conditionally. In the first case, He loves everyone without exception and, in fact, He loves everything in the universe, because He created everything beautiful, and He loves beauty. This is why Sam‘ānī writes, ‘When you say,

9. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 200–6.

10. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Kullīyyāt-i Shams yā dīwān-i kabīr*, edited by Badī‘ al-Zamān Furūzānfar, 10 volumes (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1336–46/1957–67), verse 31544.

11. *Fut.*2:326, line 26.

“He loves them,” your own shirt collar says, “You’ve got nothing over me.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, God certainly does love you, but this gives you no advantage over shirt collars, rocks and toads, because He loves everything. Advantage and disadvantage, gain and loss, happiness and misery – these enter the picture only in terms of the second sort of love, which depends on your own recognition of your love for God. As long as you think you love others, you will not be able to actualize true love and true happiness.

The door to God’s conditional love can open up only when people have understood the principle of divine unity, the fact that there is no beloved but God. At this point they need to gather their wits about them and focus on the real object of their love. Achieving focus is not possible without the assistance of the transcendent Beloved, for He is far beyond human ability to comprehend what He wants without His explicit instructions. Hence people must have recourse to the help that He has given in the form of prophecy and scripture. In other words, the road to actualize love for God and make oneself worthy for His conditional love is to follow His guidance. The connection between love and following is made explicit in the second most commonly cited Quranic verse about love: ‘Say [O Muhammad!]: “If you love God, follow me; God will love you”’ (3:31).

When we put these two verses together, the picture is clear: God loves you unconditionally, and the fruit of His love for you is that you exist and you love Him. Your existence, however, does not guarantee the ultimate well-being of your soul, for He loves those in hell just as He loves those in paradise. You need to acknowledge and realize your actual situation as a lover. You must accept what is expected of any lover, which is to submit to the wishes of your beloved. What God wants from you is defined by the Sunna of the Prophet.

The essential role of the Prophet as intermediary explains why the literature on love, not least the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī, describes him as the greatest beloved of God and the greatest lover of God. For example, the most detailed

12. Sam‘ānī, *Rawḥ*, p.295; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.65.

and profound discussions of Muhammad as Logos in Islamic literature are found in the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers, and the point of these discussions is to show that Muhammad is God’s first beloved, and that everything else was created on his shirt tails. Moreover, he is the perfect embodiment of love for God, so all those who want to actualize their innate love for God need to follow his example.

In one passage, Ibn al-‘Arabī summarizes the difference between God’s unconditional and conditional love in terms of the human reception of divine blessings. These blessings come in the form of existence and all that it entails. He points out that God bestows blessings in two ways: in an unqualified manner, that is, without anything expected from His creatures in return; and in a qualified way, that is, on condition that people follow divine guidance. He warns the seeker not to accept whatever God offers by way of creation, only what comes by the intermediary of the Prophet.

God gives to His servants from Himself, and also on the hands of His messengers. When something comes to you from the hand of the Messenger, take it without employing any scale. But when something comes to you from the hand of God, take it with a scale. For, God is identical with every giver, but He has forbidden you to take every gift. Thus He says, ‘*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take; whatever he forbids you, forgo*’ [59:7]. Thus your taking from the Messenger is more profitable for you and better able to actualize your ultimate happiness.

Your taking from the Messenger is unqualified [*muṭlaq*], but your taking from God is qualified [*muqayyad*]. The Messenger himself is qualified, but taking from him is unqualified. God is not qualified by any qualification, but taking from Him is qualified. So consider how wonderful is this affair!<sup>13</sup>

In his commentary on the Quranic verse that Ibn al-‘Arabī just cited, Maybudī makes explicit that it is referring to conditional love:

13. *Fut.4:186*, line 22; Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 146.



*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take; whatever he forbids you, forgo.* God is saying, 'Whatever drink comes to you from the auspicious hand of Muhammad the Arab, the Hashimite prophet, take, for your life lies in that. Read the tablet that he writes, learn servanthood from his character traits, take seeking from his aspiration, put his Sunna to work, walk behind him in all states. The final goal of the traveling of the servants and the perfection of their states lies in My love, and My love lies in following the Sunna and conduct of your prophet. Whoever walks straight in his tracks is My friend in reality. "Say: 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you' "' [3:31].<sup>14</sup>

The notion that conditional divine love is the cause of ultimate human happiness brings us to the third tenet of the Religion of Love: the lover's goal is to achieve union (*wiṣāl*) with his Beloved. The lover wants this because he dwells in separation (*firāq*). The scriptural reference here is a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, found in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī, to which Ibn al-ʿArabī refers more than any other prophetic saying: when someone approaches God through good works and beautiful qualities – which are defined precisely by the Prophet's Sunna – God will love that person. Then, God says, '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.' At this point separation disappears and union is achieved.

In sum, the Religion of Love as professed by Muslim scholars has three basic tenets. First, *tawḥīd*: there is no true lover and no true beloved but God. Second, prophecy: the path of actualizing God's love lies in following prophetic guidance. Third, the return to the Beloved: the lover's goal is to achieve union with his Creator. Note that these three tenets are nothing other than the three principles of Islamic faith – *tawḥīd*, prophecy, and the Return. What makes them pertain to the Religion of Love is the amorous language in which they are presented. One of the reasons for using this language is that the same ideas expressed in the abstract jargon of theology sound rather distant from

14. Maybudī, *Kashf*, 10:42.

daily concerns, so it becomes more difficult to understand their practical import. As a matter of fact – at least according to our authors – most believers simply accept the principles of faith on hearsay. They believe in what they are told to believe (like the modern attitude toward scientists and doctors). When it comes to love, however, everyone knows that love is not an issue for talk. Rather, you should experience love, not engage in theoretical discussions. Perhaps you are justified in letting others think for you, but you would never let others love for you. This is what Rūmī is getting at when he says,

Someone asked, ‘What is it to be a lover?’

I replied, ‘Don’t ask about these meanings.

‘When you become like me, you’ll see.

‘When He calls you, you’ll tell the tale.’<sup>15</sup>

### LIVING THE RELIGION OF LOVE

Given that the Religion of Love is rooted in the first principle of Islamic thought – the fact that there is no god but God, no being but the true Being, no beloved but the true Beloved, no lover but the true Lover – it follows that lovers see themselves and all things existing at the pleasure of the Beloved. His lovers love Him as He is, not as they imagine Him to be. This means that they embrace Him in all His beauty and majesty, mercy and wrath, gentleness and severity. Hence they experience constant ups and downs, all of them reflecting the joy of union and the pain of separation. Sam‘ānī fleshes out some of the implications of the lovers’ ontological situation in this passage:

In the Religion of Love, there must be both gentleness and severity, both caressing and melting, both attraction and killing, 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 know the worth of caresses.

When His Men carry the burden of caresses, they carry it while contemplating severity. When they carry the burden of severity,

15. Rūmī, *Kulliyāt*, verses 29050–1.

they carry it while seeing gentleness. Whenever anyone is nurtured in only one thing, he does not have the capacity to carry something else. If you put a dung-beetle, which spends its days in stench, in the midst of roses, there is fear that it will be destroyed, for it has passed its days in stench and does not have the capital to carry the burden of fragrance.

The angels were nurtured in gentleness and never had the opportunity to carry the burden of severity. But the Adamites are the threshold of both gentleness and severity. 'If You chastise me, I love You, and if You show mercy to me, I love You.' That great man is saying: If You have mercy, I am Your lover, and if you appoint for me a hundred thousand heart-piercing, liver-burning arrows, I am still Your lover.<sup>16</sup>

True lovers accept the Beloved's caresses and curses with equanimity. They have no thought of pleasure or pain, paradise or hell. They desire what the Beloved desires. If the Beloved desires to keep them in separation indefinitely, so be it. Lovers have no claim on beauty, wisdom, compassion, gentleness, or any other divine quality. These are the exclusive possessions of the Beloved. Sam'ānī explains:

Those who step into this road do not do so for any cause, but rather for love. The petitioner does not come from the door, but rather from within the breast. They kick aside paradise and hell, then they step forth on the road.

Looking for compensation in the road of obedience is a fatal poison. If you were to walk on this road for a thousand years and your obedience was not accepted, and then it occurred to your mind that it should have been accepted, you would have been a status-seeker, not a road-seeker. You will not be a realizer in this road until you abandon your status with both the Real and the creatures.

Someone says, 'I don't want status with the creatures, I want status at the Threshold.' Do not seek for status, either here or there! Bind up your waist and, like a man, find the broom of solitariness and disengagement. A thousand times a day sweep this threshold of your own dreadful existence. If it should happen

16. Sam'ānī, *Rawḥ*, p.513; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.344.

that you stay at the threshold for a thousand years and then it is said to you, 'Go, for you are not worthy of Me,' you will have been given your due.<sup>17</sup>

The crux of the love relationship is separation, which is our existential plight. It arises from the fact that God created us, thereby giving us an illusory existence to which we passionately cling. What we love in fact is true existence, but illusory existence keeps us veiled. The resulting sense of separation drives all human endeavor. Our innate longing forces us to understand that we are not what we should be. In other words, it is telling us that we are not fully human and that we must strive to become human. Without understanding the truth of utter separation, no one will ever make any progress in the Religion of Love. Rūmī among others constantly comes back to the lover's plight, which is also the lover's glory. The very first line of his great *Mathnawī* announces separation as the book's theme: 'Listen to the reed as it complains, / telling the tales of separation.'

People frequently have the idea that if they love God, they will reap benefit, but this is self-interest, not love. Maybudī alludes to the difference between the way most people approach religion and the path of lovers when he writes, 'In the outward Shari'a, all is gentleness, benevolence, blessing and caressing. In the Shari'a of Love, all is severity, harshness, killing and spilling blood.'<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere he explains what he has in mind:

When people choose someone for friendship, it is their habit to want every ease for their friend and not to let stormy winds blow over him. The divine custom is contrary to this. Whenever He chooses someone for friendship, He sends the drink of tribulation with the robe of love. When the rank of someone is higher in the station of love, his tribulation is greater. This is why the Prophet said, 'Surely the people most severely tried are the prophets, then the saints, then the next best, then the next best.'<sup>19</sup>

17. Sam'ānī, *Rawḥ*, pp.40–2; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p.409.

18. Maybudī, *Kashf*, 9:269.

19. Maybudī, *Kashf*, 6:294.

Sam‘ānī often describes the plight of lovers in graphic terms – terms indeed that were later mined by Rūmī and other poets. For example, in one passage he writes,

Sometimes the ocean of trial begins to send up waves and the lover no longer has the capacity to bear it. He believes that he can repent of love in order to be delivered from the trial of his caprice. But this belief is wrong. In the Shari‘a of Love, repentance is folly, for it is to seek a reprieve and to wish for a concession. ‘Sufism is constraint without peace and severity without mercy.’ ...

O dervish! Repentance is something that you acquire, but love is neither acquired nor connected with any cause. It sometimes happens that the Beloved’s beauty unveils to the lover the ruling properties of jealousy along with guarding the eyes against glancing and gazing, or rather, against thoughts and notions. Majesty demands that he abandon his own portions and desire. He must choose the Friend’s desire over his own – in separation and severity, withholding and rejection, restraint and repulsion.

The burnt lover, willingly or unwillingly, repents of seeking what he wants and looking at causes. Then God assigns the fancy of yearning and the ardor of burning to his heart and liver. The lover is unable to bear it. He cannot go forth with patience and self-restraint. What a wonder is the lover in this state! What harshness he suffers, with no mercy or favor! If he preserves his repentance, it is said, ‘Good for you, O weary man!’ And if he breaks it, it is said, ‘Bravo, O covenant-breaker!’<sup>20</sup>

Maybudī describes something of the lover’s suffering in his commentary on a Quranic verse that sets down the principle of retaliation for wrongful death: ‘O you who have faith! Written for you is retaliation in the case of the slain’ (2:178). After explaining the outward meaning of the verse, he turns to its meaning in the Religion of Love:

God is addressing the body, heart, and spirit and saying, ‘O totality of the servant! If you want to step into the lane of love, first detach your heart from life and toss away everything you know about states and acts, for in the Shari‘a of Love your life will be taken as retaliation, and everything you know will be the wergild,

20. Sam‘ānī, *Rawḥ*, p. 365; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 306.

though more is needed. Such is the Shari‘a of Love. If you are the man for the work, enter! Otherwise, nothing will get done with self-love and defilement.’ ...

Yes, it’s a marvelous work, the work of love! It’s a wonderful shari‘a, the Shari‘a of Love! Whenever someone is killed in the world, retaliation or wergild is mandatory against the killer. In the Shari‘a of Love, both retaliation and wergild are mandatory for the person killed.

Anṣārī said, ‘How should I have known that there is retaliation for those killed by love? But, when I looked, that was Your trans-action with the elect. How should I have known that love is sheer resurrection and that those killed by love should ask for wergild? Glory be to God! What work is this, what work!? He burns some people, He kills some people, and no one burned has regrets, no one killed turns away.’<sup>21</sup>

I could go on citing passages from the literature on love describing the pains and afflictions suffered by lovers as they strive to reach the Beloved’s embrace. Instead let me cite one of Rūmī’s ghazals:

Off with you! Know that the lover’s religion is  
contrary to other ways –  
falsehoods from the Friend are better than truth and  
beautiful doing.

The unthinkable for Him is the actual state,  
chastisement the reward,  
all of His wrongdoing justice, all of His slander  
equity.

His harshness is soft, His synagogue is the Ka‘ba –  
a thorn from the Heart-ravisher is sweeter than  
roses and basil.

When He is sour, He is more excellent than a house  
of sugar;  
when He comes to you annoyed, that is sweet  
kissing and embrace.

When He says to you, ‘By God, I’m sick of you!’  
that is the water of Khidr from the Fountain of Life.

21. Maybudī, *Kashf*, 1:479–80; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 371.

When He says 'No!' a thousand yeses are hidden  
 within;  
 in the religion of the selfless you're family if you're  
 a stranger.<sup>22</sup>  
 His unbelief is all faith, His stones all coral,  
 His miserliness all beautiful-doing, His offenses all  
 forgiveness.  
 You may taunt me and say, 'You've got a bent  
 religion!' –  
 I have bought the religion of His bent eyebrow at  
 the price of my spirit.  
 This bent religion has made me drunk! Enough! I  
 will shut my lips –  
 continue on, O illuminated heart, recite the rest in  
 silence!  
 O Shams of God Tabrīzī! O Lord! What sugar you  
 pour down!  
 You voice a hundred arguments and proofs from my  
 mouth!<sup>23</sup>

### IBN AL-'ARABĪ'S RELIGION OF LOVE

Let me now come back to Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of the Religion of Love. First we need to recall what he means by religion, *dīn*. He explains that the Arabic word has three basic senses and that the first of these, *inqiyād* (acquiescence or obedience), is of particular relevance to seekers of God.<sup>24</sup> At the

22. Let me cite here one of many parallels with the earlier prose literature: Anṣārī writes, 'Establish your relation with this group [the friends of God] through nonbeing, not with being. As long as you have being, you will be cut off from this group and joined with selfhood. The members of this group are related to each in that they do not have each-otherness with each other. They have kinship with each other in distance from their own selfhoods.' Anṣārī, *Chihil u daw faṣl*, in *Majmū'a-yi rasā'il-i fārsī*, edited by Muḥammad Sarwar Mawlā'ī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tūs, 1377/1998), p. 169; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 336.

23. Rūmī, *Kulliyāt*, ghazal no. 1869.

24. The other two are *jazā'* (requital or recompense), and *'āda* (custom or habit). On these three meanings and specifically the significance of

beginning of Chapter 8 of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, he writes,

Religion consists of your acquiescence. The religion that comes from God is the Shari‘a to which you have acquiesced, for religion is acquiescence. The Law is the Shari‘a that God has set down for you. Those who have the quality of acquiescing to that which God has set down are the ones who stand forth in the religion and put it into practice.

In a passage in the *Futūḥāt* about the imam who leads the daily prayer, Ibn al-‘Arabī explains that people need to follow the imam only when he is fulfilling his function, not at other times. Then he says that this stands in stark contrast to following the Prophet, since lovers must follow him at all times. And, he reminds us, only following opens them up to God’s love:

It is required to follow the imam as long as he is called imam. When the name imam leaves him, it is not required to follow him. In contrast, the imamate of the Messenger never disappears, so following him is required. Moreover, God is required to love those who follow him, without doubt. God says, ‘*You have a beautiful example in God’s messenger*’ [33:21]. And, it was said to the Prophet, ‘*Say: “[If you love God,] follow me; God will love you”*’ [3:31]. When God loves His servant, He is all of his faculties and limbs, and the servant acts only with his own faculties and limbs. Hence he acts only through God. Thus he is protected when he acts, whether moving or resting.<sup>25</sup>

It may seem bold of Ibn al-‘Arabī to say, ‘God is *required* to love those who follow him,’ but he is simply reiterating what the verse is saying, lest anyone try to exempt God from His promises. Elsewhere, instead of ‘require’ (*luzūm*) he uses the verb ‘necessitate’ (*ījāb*, from *wujūb*):

Man may flow with the revealed Law by understanding its tongue.  
Wherever the Lawgiver walks, he walks, and wherever he stops,

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*dīn* as habit, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 312–14.

25. *Fut.*1:486, line 6.



he stops, step by step. This is the state of the middle, and through it he will be loved by God. God told His Prophet to say, 'Follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins' [3:31]. So, following the Lawgiver and pursuing his tracks necessitates God's love for the servants as well as the soundness of permanent felicity.<sup>26</sup>

Ibn al-'Arabī's use of the word 'necessity' here will remind readers familiar with his writings of a parallel discussion about unconditional and conditional *rah̄ma*, mercy and compassion. *Rah̄ma* can best be understood in human terms as a mother's love for her child, keeping in mind the word's derivation from *rah̄im*, womb. Ibn al-'Arabī distinguishes between the mercy pertaining to the All-Merciful (*rah̄mān*) and the mercy pertaining to the Ever-Merciful (*rah̄īm*) – a frequent discussion in theology – by saying that the first is unconditional and the second conditional. The terms he usually uses are *rah̄mat al-imtīnān*, 'the mercy of free gift,' and *rah̄mat al-wujūb*, 'the mercy of necessity.' God bestows the first mercy on all things by creating them, and He bestows the second on those who follow in the tracks of the prophets. Like some other authors, Ibn al-'Arabī finds a reference to the two sorts of mercy in the verse, 'My mercy embraces everything [unconditionally], and I shall write it [the second sort of mercy] for those who [fulfill the conditions, that is, who] are wary of Me, pay the alms-tax, and have faith in Our signs' (7:156).<sup>27</sup>

In the famous poem, Ibn al-'Arabī says, 'I practice the religion of love, wherever its camels turn their faces.' Given his understanding of the word 'religion,' he clearly means that he has acquiesced and submitted to the tenets of the Religion of Love and that he has stood forth in it and put it into practice. When we look at his commentary on the verse, it becomes clear that he is talking specifically about the second tenet, that is, acquiescing to the Sunna of the Prophet:

26. *Fut.2*:240, line 26.

27. On the two mercies, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp.26, 130 (*wujūb* is translated there as 'obligation'). Another author who makes the same distinction is Ibn al-'Arabī's contemporary Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209) in his Quran commentary, '*Arā'is al-bayān*'. See Chittick, *Divine Love*, pp.30–2.

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.' 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.

As for my words, 'This religion is my religion and my faith,' this means that in the view of those who adhere to Him through Him and who are commanded by Him from the Unseen, there is no religion higher than the religion that stands upon love and yearning. This is specific to the Muhammadans, for Muhammad, among all the prophets, had the station of love to perfection, even though he also had the other stations of the prophets, such as the chosenness [of Adam], the intimate discourse [of Moses], and the bosom friendship [of Abraham]. But he went beyond them because God took him as *ḥabīb*, that is, His lover and beloved. Muhammad's inheritors follow in his path.

Notice that Ibn al-'Arabī says that the station of love is specific to the Muhammadans. This does not mean 'the Muslims.' In his vocabulary the Muhammadans are the perfect human beings par excellence, those who stand in the highest station of spiritual perfection, a station that was achieved only by the Prophet and a few of his great followers. He commonly says that the Muhammadans stood in 'the station of no station' (*maqām lā maqām*), meaning that they achieved union with God, thus transcending all the stations on the path, all the individual perfections that human beings can realize. Their station embraces every possible human perfection, that is, every possible manifestation of divine perfection. Since the Muhammadans have gone beyond all stations and internalized all the perfections designated by the stations, they cannot be limited to one station or another. Rather, they draw from the perfections of all of the prophets and make manifest those that are appropriate to the human situation.<sup>28</sup>

28. On this station, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp. 375–81.

Ibn al-‘Arabī was not the first to talk about the Station of No Station. A hundred years earlier, Sam‘ānī had explained that the Prophet stands in ‘the station of stationlessness,’ using the Arabic–Persian compound word *maqām-i bī-maqāmī*. He wrote, for example,

On the night of the *mi‘rāj* Muhammad was made to pass over all the stations so that he would be higher than everyone else. Thus they would all be seeking his station, and he would be fleeing from their stations. When he was taken through all the stations, nothing was left but stationlessness, and that is the attribute of the Real. He pulled up the ropes of his secret core’s tent such that he was gazing at the Real, not at the station. All the creatures were gazing at the station, but he was gazing at the Real.<sup>29</sup>

As for Rūmī, he does not mention the Station of No Station explicitly, but he often alludes to it. Take, for example, the quatrain that is cited on the website describing my talk: ‘Be certain that in the religion of Love there are no believers and unbelievers. Love embraces all.’<sup>30</sup> This ‘translation,’ unfortunately, is rather typical of the way Rūmī is presented in the popular collections of his poetry. An accurate rendering makes clear that he is talking about the stage of union, where the lover has gone beyond the stations to the point of transcending all differentiation.

Know for certain that the lover is not a Muslim.

In the Religion of Love, there is no unbelief or  
faith.

In love, there is neither body, nor intellect, nor  
heart, nor spirit –

anyone who has not become like this is not that  
[i.e., a lover].<sup>31</sup>

29. Sam‘ānī, *Rawḥ*, p. 344; Chittick, *Divine Love*, p. 172.

30. This version of the quatrain is from Maryam Mafi and Azima Melita Kolin, *Rumi: Whispers of the Beloved* (HarperCollins, 1999), p. 71.

31. In the Furūzānfar edition of the *Rubā‘iyyāt*, this is no. 768. For the Persian text and a slightly different English translation, see the excellent work by Ibrahim A. Gamard and A.G. Rawān Farhādī, *The Quatrains of Rumi* (San Rafael, CA: Sufi Dari Books, 2008), quatrain no. 1311 (p.406).

By 'Muslim' in this poem Rūmī means the common believer who has made little or no progress in loving God and following the Prophet. There is no suggestion that belief and unbelief, or following and not following, are not important. Rather, those who have reached the Beloved have entered the *coincidentia oppositorum*. They transcend the differentiations and distinctions demanded by our situation in the world. It is precisely these distinctions that are addressed by the Prophet's Sunna, which is typically divided into two complementary dimensions: the Shari'a, which is the revealed Law as codified by the jurists; and the Tariqa, which is the path of discipline and struggle as codified by the Sufi teachers.

So, exactly 'where' does the seeker reach such a coincidence of opposites? Only, in Sam'ānī's words, when he arrives at the station where 'nothing is left but stationlessness.' Rūmī makes clear that this is the issue in the second half of the quatrain (which was largely ignored by the cited translation). He refers to a standard discussion, that is, the ascending levels of selfhood that the seeker must actualize.<sup>32</sup> Thus he says that there is no body, no intellect, no heart, and no spirit. In other words, nothing of the created self remains between lover and Beloved for, to use another common expression, the lover has attained the station of 'nonbeing' (*nīstī*). This is not to say that 'faith and unbelief' are unimportant. Quite the contrary, inasmuch as a human being still dwells on the levels of body, intellect, heart, and spirit – and he has no choice but to dwell on these levels, because they define the human situation – he remains bound to the wishes of his Beloved, which are defined by the Shari'a and the Tariqa.

Ibn al-'Arabī's famous verse is usually quoted along with the two verses leading up to it. If we read these as well, along with Ibn al-'Arabī's commentary, we can see that he is explaining

32. In later literature, these levels were often called 'subtleties' (*laṭīfa*) and numbered as seven, in keeping with the seven spheres through which the Prophet traveled in the *mi'rāj*. In the tradition from which Rūmī was drawing, there were a number of ways of differentiating among the levels. See, for example, the chapter 'Spiritual Psychology' in Chittick, *Divine Love*.

some of the implications of the religion of the Muhammadans, which is perfect imitation of the Prophet by attaining to the Station of No Station. The verses are these:

My heart has become the receptacle for every form,  
 a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks,  
 A house of idols, a Ka'ba for the circumambulator,  
 tablets for the Torah, a volume for the Quran.

'My heart has become a receptacle for every form' alludes to the Station of No Station, the realized consciousness of the human being who recognizes that every belief is true for those who hold it. The Perfect Human Being, in other words, shares in the all-comprehensive vision set down by the Quran, the vision that embraces all the teachings of all 124,000 prophets. In the heart of the Perfect Human, all 'knots' ('*uqda*) have been untied. These knots are the 'beliefs' ('*aqīda*) that bind the hearts of ordinary mortals.<sup>33</sup>

The rest of these two verses provides examples of the forms embraced by the lover's all-comprehensive heart. Here is Ibn al-'Arabī's explanation:

'My heart has become a receptacle for every form.' Elsewhere I have said that the heart was named heart [*qalb*] only because of its fluctuation [*taqallub*], for it undergoes variation through the variation of the arrivals that come into it.<sup>34</sup> The arrivals undergo variation because of the variation of the heart's states, and its states undergo variation because of the variation of the divine self-disclosures to its secret core. This is what the revealed Law refers to by 'transmutation and change in forms.'<sup>35</sup>

33. On the gods of belief, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Ch. 19; idem, *Imaginal Worlds*, Ch. 10.

34. On the heart's fluctuation, see Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, pp.106–9.

35. The quotation refers to a sound hadith, often mentioned by Ibn al-'Arabī, that describes God's appearance to the people on the Day of Resurrection. See Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, p.38 and passim. As for the point about the states changing because of the self-disclosures, see his detailed explanation along with a diagram in *Fut.2:265–6*; translated in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, pp.157–60.

Then I say, 'a pasture for gazelles.' In other words, having described the heart as a pasture, I referred to those who are roaming therein as gazelles rather than any other animal. This is because our words are in the tongue of amorous love. In this tongue, lovers declare their beloveds to be similar to gazelles. There is no doubt that the black pupil of the horse's eye is wide, but no one has declared similarity to any eye but that of the gazelle.

As for my words, 'a monastery for monks,' by making them monks – derived from the word *monasticism* – I am saying that I have made the heart a monastery by way of affinity, for a monastery is the home of monks and the site of their settling down.

Then I say that this heart is the form of 'a house of idols.' Given that the realities sought by mortal man stand within himself and that he worships God for their sake, I call them idols.

Ibn al-'Arabī frequently calls the idols inside everyone's heart 'the gods of belief.' He maintains that no one worships God as God, given that 'None knows God but God.' Instead, each of us worships the god or gods that we understand. In a certain respect, it is the god of my belief that keeps me in my own station, for it is my understanding of this god that has tied my heart in a knot. Progress on the path to God demands negating the gods of all beliefs while recognizing their limited utility. By passing beyond all stations and transcending the gods of all beliefs, one is given access to the never-ending and never-repeating self-disclosures of the God beyond all gods; this is precisely the Station of No Station.

And since the celestial spirits are circling around my heart, I name my heart a 'Ka'ba.' These are the spirits that were remembered by me when I was touched by a circumambulator from Satan. They are the angelic suggestions.<sup>36</sup>

And, because of the Mosaic, Hebraic sciences I acquired, I made my heart 'tablets' for them. Because of the perfect, Muhammadan recognitions I inherited, I made them a volume. I placed them in the station of the 'Quran' because of what the

36. On Ibn al-'Arabī's understanding of angelic and satanic 'suggestions' (*lamma*), see Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, pp. 119–20.

Prophet had received from the station of 'I have been given the all-comprehensive words.'<sup>37</sup>

A great deal more could be said about Ibn al-'Arabī's poem and its commentary, but let me instead summarize my points by saying that his Religion of Love is not quite what most people imagine it to be. It certainly implies openness to the beauty of God's creation along with love and compassion for all of God's creatures, but more than anything else it is a program of action, that of putting the Sunna into practice on the two basic levels discussed in classical Sufism, the Shari'a and the Tariqa, with the aim of reaching the Haqiqa, which is the Divine Reality Itself. These stages are described succinctly by Rūmī in his prose introduction to Book 5 of the *Mathnawī*, where he also alludes to the transcending of 'faith and unbelief' mentioned in the quoted quatrain. At the level of the Haqiqa, the lover dwells in union, beyond all the specifications and designations of the Shari'a and the Tariqa. These are his words:

This is the fifth volume of the *Mathnawī*, a book that is explaining that the Shari'a is like a candle showing the road. Without bringing the candle to hand, you will not be able to go forth on the road. When you enter the road, your going forth is the Tariqa. When you reach the goal, that is the Haqiqa. ...

The Shari'a is like learning the knowledge of alchemy from a teacher or a book. The Tariqa is employing potions and rubbing the copper with the elixir. The Haqiqa is for copper to become gold.

The Shari'a is like learning the knowledge of medicine. The Tariqa is to avoid certain foods and to take certain remedies in keeping with this knowledge. The Haqiqa is to find endless health and to be free of both Shari'a and Tariqa, for, when the child of Adam dies to this life, the Shari'a and the Tariqa will be cut off from him, and only the Haqiqa will remain.

37. *Dhakhā'ir al-a'lāq*, edited by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kurdī (Cairo, 1968), pp.49–50.