

### William C. Chittick

*Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. xxix + 490 pages, notes, bibliography, index of Qur'anic verses, index of hadiths and sayings, index of names and terms. Cloth. ISBN 9780300185959. US \$85.00.

This unusual book appears to have been written with two main aims in mind: firstly, to address the subject of love, its place in Islam and significance for Sufis, in a way that will be accessible to lay or non-specialist readers; and secondly, to celebrate and make better known two masterpieces of Persian literature, the *Kashf al-asrār wa 'uddat al-abrār* of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. 1126) and the *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fī sharḥ asmā' al-malik al-fattāḥ* of Aḥmad Sam'ānī (d. 1167). Translations from these two Persian works make up the greater part by far of this 430-page anthology, and therefore the wider implication of 'Islamic Literature' in the second part of the title could more properly be applied to the latter part of the book where passages from other authors, such as Ibn Sīnā, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, Muḥammad Ghazālī, Aḥmad Ghazālī, Rūzbihān Baqlī and Qushayrī, make more of an appearance. At a rough estimate, material included in *Divine Love* comprises some 45% from Maybudī, 35% from Sam'ānī, 10% from 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 1089) and the remaining 10% from other authors.

However, there is no doubt Maybudī's *Kashf al-asrār* and Sam'ānī's *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* deserve much greater exposure in Western languages. Moreover, it is only fitting that they should have pride of place in a monograph on love, for they represent an extraordinary moment in Persian cultural history, when the doctrines of mystical love found the perfect literary language for their expression. Chittick correctly reminds us that themes, motifs and metaphors that we later see in the poetry of 'Aṭṭār, Rūmī and Ḥāfīz can all be found in the artistic and poetic prose of these two twelfth-century authors.

Both Maybudī's *Kashf al-asrār* and Sam'ānī's *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* are exegetical works, the former a commentary on the Qur'an and the latter a commentary on the ninety-nine names of God. Maybudī's commentary is structured such that the entire Qur'an is divided into sessions (*majālis*), each of which is then subdivided into three 'turns' or *nawbats*. Of these, the first comprises a translation and the second a conventional commentary on all of the verses, while the third is reserved for a mystical or esoteric commentary on a selection of verses. The third sections, from which Chittick has selected his readings, amount to over 1000 pages in the printed edition. The *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a shorter work of some 450 pages, but the content is almost entirely mystical in nature, that is, it concerns the purification of the soul or self and the human journey towards union with God.

As a book, Chittick's *Divine Love* is a remarkable labour of love. Some 350 passages, the great majority of these in Persian, have been carefully and faithfully translated into English. It is almost impossible to convey the sweetness and beauty of these Persian works in English, and yet Chittick has overall effectively given us a sense of the subtle and poetic language used by these authors, and captured well the spirit of the Persian originals. In addition, he manages to incorporate contemporary expressions so that the translations do not sound too flowery and archaic.

Individual or related groups of passages are provided with brief introductions—it is clear that Chittick has tried as far as possible to let the texts speak for themselves. But the material is also framed and interwoven with his own reflections on the significance of love and the need for us to turn from the 'unreal to the Real'. As a whole, the book is arranged in three parts: 'The Origin of Love', 'The Life of Love' and 'The Goal of Love'. Broadly speaking these comprise discussions of: the divine nature and origin of love, its role in the creation and the way in which human beings have been divinely chosen and inwardly predisposed towards the love of God (Part One); the need for human beings to recognise the role for which they were created and the way in which they may traverse the path of love towards God (Part Two); and finally, the culmination of the way of love, which means attaining a state of annihilation of the self, and subsistence in God, in other words the true realisation of *tawḥīd* (Part Three). Each of the three parts is divided into three chapters and the chapters are further divided into subsections. For every new concept or aspect of love that he introduces, Chittick shows how the teaching is rooted in Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet, and also often provides some general and simplified theological and philosophical background to the topic. In addition, he helpfully juxtaposes these teachings with modern ideas and preconceptions. In a number of contexts he finds imaginative ways to explain theological concepts, as in his section, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place', where he discusses the tension between free will and predestination, and between the creative and religious command.

Not surprisingly, since this is a book on divine love in Islam, frequent reference is made, both in the works themselves and in Chittick's comments, to the two Qur'anic proof texts that underlie all discourse on love in Islam. The first is part of Q. 5:54, which states, *He loves them and they love Him*, whence Chittick derives the following four axioms: God's eternally loving nature; humans as the specific object of God's love; humans' innate loving nature; and God as the true object of human love. The second proof text is part of Q. 3:31, *Say [o Muḥammad] if you love God, follow me; God will love you*, concerning which Chittick explains that by following the guidance embodied in Muḥammad,

‘people can complete the circle of existence, which began when God created the universe because *He loves them*. They came into existence as objects of His love, and they are infused with love and desire because of the creative command, which demands that *they love Him* [...] The function of the guide is to take them back to God, and God in His love will embrace them.’ As evidence for this ‘embracing by God’ that Chittick cites the well-known ḥadīth qudsī, often referred to as the *nawāfil ḥadīth*, according to which God says, ‘My servant approaches Me with good deeds (supererogatory acts), such that I love him, and 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, as Chittick states, the final goal of love, when love and Beloved become one, and when, as is indicated in Part 3 of the book, the servant loses his unreal being and finds the real being of God.

Apart from the Preface of the book, where Chittick includes some brief biographical information on the authors, it is interesting to find that the book itself provides little historical context for the doctrines that are discussed. This is perhaps intentional and fits in with the idea that the underlying message of these texts, and the insights they provide into the inner make-up and vocation of the human being, are timeless and relevant to everyone living now. However, notwithstanding the positive didactic advantages of leaving aside historical context, it should be added that, despite what we might be led to expect from a few references to, and quibbles with existing scholarship that appear in the Preface to *Divine Love*, this is not an academic book. And it seems that it was not intended to be, for endnote references are few and far between—Chittick admits that he has tried to avoid them as much as he can. The majority of those that he does provide are to his own writings on Ibn ‘Arabī and Rūmī. The fact that he nowhere raises the question of authenticity regarding two of the main sources he uses for Anṣārī, *Chihil u daw faṣl* and *Maḥabbat-nāma*, could be overlooked on the basis that the texts themselves, whatever their provenance, are beautiful in both content and expression and certainly worth including. Yet there are times when at least some further information or a more specific reference is called for, as when the author mentions (150) that ‘scholars of later times who described the ascending levels of the self as seven subtleties did so at least because the Prophet ascended through seven spheres in his journey to God’—presumably a reference to Simnānī (d. 1336); or when in a translation from Maybudī we find the statement that the Qur’an was sent down according to ‘seven letters’ (*aḥruf*) (sic, 171); or in another passage where Maybudī explains that according to sharī‘ah, ‘it is not permitted for buyer and seller to be the same’. In the section entitled ‘Love in Early Sufism’ (Part 3, Chapter 7), which in fact only begins with texts dating from the 11th century, some reference

could have been made to the valuable studies of Ernst, Takeshita, Pourjavady, and more recently, Lumbard on developments in love mysticism. Given that Anṣārī is the third most cited author in the book, it is surprising to find not a single reference to the writings and translations of Serge de Beaucueuil, who dedicated decades to the study of the Ḥanbalite mystic.

To observe that this is not an academic book is not, however, to say that it will not be of interest to academics, far from it; the translated texts in themselves provide a great deal of data for those working in the field of Sufism. Nonetheless, teachers who, as I have already done, recommend this book as a reader for their students of love mysticism, may feel the need to provide other secondary sources as background on the subject.

Professor Chittick is an eminent scholar in the field of Islamic thought and Sufism, and an old hand in the business of translating Arabic and Persian texts into English. All this experience, perhaps, enables him to be more daring in the choice of words for his translations. It is certainly to be applauded that he questions existing conventions in the translation of words such as *maʿrifa*, often rendered as ‘gnosis’, and *iḥsān* as ‘sincerity’. However, not everyone would agree with his alternatives. Whilst it is true that the Arabic root ‘-r-f’, from which ‘*arīf*’ and *maʿrifa* are derived, can mean knowing in the sense of ‘recognizing’, to render *maʿrifa* as ‘recognition’ (and hence ‘*arīf*’ as ‘recognizer’) somehow reduces the meaning of the term, which in the original also has a sense of an immediate, experiential and transformative knowing. Neither ‘doing the beautiful’ as an equivalent for *iḥsān* nor ‘beautiful doer’ for *muḥsin* lie easily in English, and we also have here the problem that *ḥ-s-n* in Arabic means both good and beautiful—note that Chittick also translates *sū* as ‘the ugly’ or ‘ugliness’ rather than ‘evil’.

Inevitably, when translating we are faced with having to choose a one-word equivalent to an Arabic word which may have dozens of meanings. Sometimes, it may be better to use a different translation for the same word according to context, as in the translation of *hawā*, which usually, but not always, implies ‘desire’ in a negative sense, and is in this book consistently rendered as ‘caprice’. In his Preface, Chittick sets out the different words that are used for love in Arabic and Persian, while on p. 311 he notes that Aḥmad Ghazālī makes no attempt to distinguish between *maḥabba* and ‘*ishq*’, using both interchangeably for love. Yet probably in the interest of consistency, Chittick always translates ‘*ishq*’ as ‘passion’. I believe that in the majority of texts that are translated here (and especially those of Maybudī and Samʿānī) the words *ḥubb*, *maḥabba*, *īshq*, *dūstī* and *mīhr* are mostly intended to mean ‘love’, and from the 12th century onwards, ‘*ishq*’ became the word of preference for love, understood by the

initiated to signify that intense, profound and uncompromising love that was required of the mystic lover.

Some of Chittick's innovative renderings do err on the side of literalism, just a few examples being: 'eye-service' for *riyā'* (rather than 'ostentation'); 'Giving Life', for *Iḥyā'* (rather than 'Revival'), 'road shower', a literal translation of the Persian *rāhnimā* (why not 'guide?'); and finally, 'Adamites' for *ādamiyān*, where what is meant is simply human beings, or 'descendants of Adam'. Admittedly, the choice of words is often a matter of personal taste, and I have to admit to preferring 'purity' to 'limpidity' (as in 'Brethren of Limpidity') despite the more precise sense of the latter. Occasionally, one is met with sentences in the translations that are quite obscure, as the following (160): 'The tawhid of Muslims amounts to three words: affirmation of attributes without excess, negation of similarity without declaring ineffectuality, and going forward according to the outward sense without mixing'. This is clearly a statement of the need to take a middle course between *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, and to avoid the metaphorical interpretation of the anthropomorphic verses, a principle that held particular importance for both Anṣārī and Maybudī. Other examples of obscurities include: 'Whatever I counted as a mark curtailed me and whatever I considered a resource was foolish' (101); and 'He has inscribed on it [the human make-up] the lights of fabrication and the traces of honouring' (109).

These remarks are not intended to take away from the overall quality of the translations to which I have already referred. However, I have two main and not unrelated concerns about this book. The first is that it is simply too long. One wishes that the author had been more selective in his choice of extracts. There are instances where several passages, beautiful in their own way, are cited to illustrate the same teaching. There are others, where a page or two of text has been translated where a short extract would have sufficed and could have been more effective in communicating the idea. A greater selectivity might have, on the one hand, avoided duplication and on the other, resulted in the exclusion of some of the unnecessary obscurities exemplified above. The author's attempt to be exhaustive has also resulted in confusion and overlapping in the arrangement of material within sections of the book. This is particularly the case with Parts Two and Three. One wonders why vision of God and proximity come into Part Two, whilst the suffering of love, jealousy and blame are placed in the Part Three. In the final part, we are presented once more with the ontology of love, this time from the perspective of philosophy, and here also we encounter a section on love in early Sufism, which one might have expected to find nearer the beginning of the book. The section entitled 'Following the Path' appears to be only concerned with suffering. In Part Two we have a section

on stations of the path, and in Part Three, on the stages of love. There is one inaccuracy that should be mentioned here: Maybudī, like most commentators, understands the words *I do not exculpate myself* [...] (Q. 12:53) to have been spoken by Joseph, and not by Zulaykhā, as is asserted on p. 256.

Overall, despite these concerns, Chittick's *Divine Love* is warmly to be welcomed because of the wealth of material it provides on twelfth-century love mysticism, especially for those who do not have direct access to Persian—it may even encourage more people to learn the language. Translations from Arabic prose into English greatly outweigh those that are available from Persian, so this may go some way towards redressing the balance. It is to be hoped that non-specialist readers will stay the course, and benefit from this inspired account of love and spirituality in Islam. These two aspects, though integral to Islamic culture, have received too little attention in recent times.

*Annabel Keeler*

University of Cambridge (UK)