
Love in the History of Sufism Experience and Language

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**I knew my Lord through my Lord,
without my Lord never would I have known my Lord
Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859)**

Abstract:

Arabic excelled other Semitic languages by bestowing new meanings on the term (love), meanings that transcended the sensual aspects of the term. More importantly, the term (love) occupied a central position in the Arabic language, and it also underwent deep religious, spiritual, and philosophical developments. Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions left their impact at an early stage (in the first and second centuries after Hijra) on the formulation of the mystical language of love (the language of spiritual experience). It is worth noting that the rich and unique Arabic vocabulary enabled mystics to express the slightest shades of human emotions, related to love in general and divine love in specific. The etymology of the word love and its different derivations enjoy a central status in Arabic as well as in Sufism.

As such was born a new language never known to pre-Islam Arabs, a language distant from the dominant forms of Classical Arabic literature. It was the language of love (the language of spiritual experience to mystics), a language that emerged from the start without external cultural sources or influences in order to express the originality of the spiritual experience of Islam. Having undergone a certain development, such language of love as well as the spiritual experience it carries became the main component, and even the goal, of any work in Muslim Sufism starting from the 3rd Hijri century. This makes our scope of analysis extremely wide, and thus I will attempt in this study to shed light only on some of the main features. It is an attempt as well to sketch the historical context of the Sufi contributions by aid of the following elements:

- Introduction
- Love in the First Ascetic Movement
- The Beginning of the Path of Pure Love: Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya.
- Towards a Mysticism of Union: al-Hallāğ



- Love in Sunni Sufism: al-Ġazālī.
- Love in Philosophical Sufism: Ibn al-'Arabī.
- Conclusion.

key words; Love, Sufism, Sunni Sufism, Philosophical Sufism, mysticism.

الحب في التصوف الإسلامي

بين الخبرة واللغة

أ.د. جوزيبي سكاتولين¹

د. أحمد حسن أنور²

"عرفت ربي بربي، ولولا ربي لما عرفت ربي"
ذو النون المصري (ت: 245هـ / 859م)

الملخص باللغة العربية⁽³⁾ :

تميزت اللغة العربية عن مختلف اللغات السامية الأخرى بإعطائها معاني جديدة لكلمة (حب)؛ معاني متسامية عن الجوانب العاطفية الحسية، بل والأهم من ذلك أن كلمة (حب) وجدت مكانة مركزية في اللغة

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³ - ومن المهم جدا الإشارة إلى أن هذا البحث عمل مشترك بين المستشرق الإيطالي جوزيبي سكاتولين (Giuseppe Scattolin) والباحث المصري د. أحمد حسن أنور، ويأتي هذا البحث تحديداً كتطوير لعمل بحثي آخر مشترك بيننا نشر في: المعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية بروما- إيطاليا- عام 2009م تحت عنوان: المحبة في تاريخ التصوف (L'amour Dans L'histoire Du Sufisme) عدد صفحاته (280) صفحة، وقد ساهم أحمد حسن أنور- بالاشتغال على النص العربي كاملاً في الكتاب المشار إليه سلفاً، في حين اشتغل جوزيبي سكاتولين على النص الفرنسي كاملاً. فأردنا تطوير العمل شيئاً فشيئاً وإخراجه في لغة مشتركة تكون متاحة للقارئ العربي والغربي معاً، فأخرجناه في هذا الشكل باللغة الإنجليزية.

والجدير بالذكر أن المؤلفين يعملان معاً على دراسة التصوف الإسلامي منذ عام 2007م ونشرا عدة أعمال مشتركة منها:

- التجليات الروحية في الإسلام (الطبعة الأولى: الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب- 2008م)، (الطبعة الثانية: مكتبة الأسرة- الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب- 2013م)، (الطبعة الثالثة: الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب- 2015م)، القاهرة، مصر. كما ترجم هذا الكتاب إلى اللغة الإيطالية.
- الأبعاد الصوفية عند عبد الملك الخركوشي (دراسة ونصوص)، دار مصر المحروسة، 2009م، القاهرة، مصر.
- المحبة في تاريخ التصوف (باللغة العربية والفرنسية)، المعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية، روما، إيطاليا، 2009م..... علاوة على اشتراكهما معاً في عدة ورش عمل دولية بـ (مصر، إيطاليا، المجر، سلوفاكيا).



العربية من ناحية، ثم خضعت لتطورات دينية وروحية وفلسفية عميقة من ناحية أخرى. ولقد أثرت الآيات القرآنية والأحاديث النبوية على تشكيل لغة الحب (لغة الخبرة الروحية) على صوفية الإسلام في مرحلة مبكرة (في القرنين الأول والثاني الهجريين). كما أن مفردات اللغة العربية الغزيرة والفريدة والمتميزة قد ساعدت المتصوفة على التعبير عن أدق خلجات المشاعر الإنسانية المرتبطة بالحب عامة، والحب الإلهي خاصة، فالجذر (ح-ب-ب) بمختلف مشتقاته له مكانة مركزية في اللغة العربية عامة، وفي التصوف الإسلامي خاصة.

ومن هذا المنطلق تم ميلاد لغة جديدة؛ لغة لم تكن معروفة عند العرب قبل الإسلام، لغة بعيدة عن الشكلية السائدة في الأدب العربي القديم، ألا وهي لغة الحب (لغة الخبرة الروحية عند الصوفية)، لغة نشأت- في بدايتها- دون أي مصادر ثقافية خارجية، لتعبر عن أصالة التجربة الروحية في الإسلام. وبتطور لغة الحب (لغة الخبرة الروحية) أصبحت هذه (اللغة) و(الخبرة الروحية) المكون الرئيسي- بل والهدف أيضا- لأي كتاب في التصوف الإسلامي ابتداءً من القرن الثالث الهجري، مما يجعل مجال هذا البحث واسع للغاية، لذلك فسنحاول في هذا البحث تسليط الضوء على بعض السمات الأساسية فقط، في محاولة رسم مخطط عريض للسياق التاريخي الذي قدمه الصوفية في هذا المجال، من خلال العناصر التالية:

- مقدمة.
- الحب في حركة الزهد الأولى (القرنين الأول والثاني الهجريين/ السابع والثامن الميلاديين).
- بدايات الحب الخالص (القرن الثاني الهجري/ القرن الثامن الميلادي): رابعة العدوية.
- نحو تصوف الاتحاد: الحلاج.
- الحب في التصوف السني: الغزالي.
- الحب في التصوف الفلسفي: ابن العربي.
- الخاتمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحب، الاتحاد، التصوف، التصوف السني، التصوف الفلسفي.



Introduction

Arabic language and literature have a very rich vocabulary of love. In a study on Ibn al-Fārid's *Great Tā'iyya*, eighteen stems that express different aspects of the idea of love have been analyzed. Among them all, however, it is clearly the derivatives of the root (*H B B*) that have a central place in the semantic spectrum of the Arabic language of love. The derivatives of this root, such as *ḥubb-maḥabba* (love), *muḥibb-ḥabīb* (lover), *maḥbūb-ḥabīb* (beloved), etc., are the most used among the expressions of love.¹

The root (*H B B*) is also found in other Semitic languages and its original basic meaning seems to be that of a 'strong attachment to something concrete, pleasing and satisfying human desires', first of all in a sexual context and relationships. However, it seems that only in the Arabic language that the derivatives of this root have found a central place and have undergone a particular development, while in other Semitic languages it has been marginalized in favour of other roots.² A good description of this kind of passionate and sensual love is given in the Koran itself in a passage in which the main objects of human natural love (*ḥubb*) are described:

"To people the desire (*ḥubb*) of their passions (*ṣahawāt*) have been made attractive: women, sons, full measures of gold and silver, well dressed horses, cattle and well-tilled fields. These are the joys of the present world, but God has the best of returns ". (K 3, 14)

(زَيْنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ وَالْفِضَّةِ وَالْخَيْلِ الْمُسَوَّمَةِ
وَالْأَنْعَامِ وَالْحَرْثِ ذَلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَاَبِ) [سورة آل عمران، الآية: 14].

These are the main objects of natural human love, before being purified by faith. Love shows itself to be a very strong inclination that makes people 'blind and deaf', as stated in a well-known saying: "Your love for something makes

¹ For a general overview of the different usages and meaning of the derivatives of the root (*H B B*) see: Régis Blachère-Charles Pellat, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais* (=DAFA), G.-P. Maisonneuve, Paris, 1976, Tome III, 1993a-2009a; and other dictionaries like: Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāt al-'Arabī, Beirut, 1419/1999, t. III, 7-12; A. De Birbestein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français*, Maisonneuve, Paris, 1958, t. I, 365; Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Librairie du Liban, Beirut, 1968 (1st ed. 1865), part 2, 495-498; Maḡma' al-Luḡat al-'Arabiyya, *Mu'ḡam Alfāz al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Cairo, 1953, t. I, 243-245; Elsaid M. Badawi – Muhammad Adbel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, 186-187.

² DAFA III, 1993a.



you blind and deaf".¹ In Arabic literature one finds all kinds of expression of such love, especially sexual love and attraction, that has become a main theme of many love stories and poetry. However, this 'blind overpowering impulse' for sensual-sexual pleasure has been gradually elevated to signify also intimate friendship and companionship in all its forms. Expressions such as *ahl al-maḥabba* (lovers), *iktisāb al-maḥabba* (to acquire love) of the beloved (*ḥabīb*), and other expressions of love in its degrees, have become part of the common language of love-friendship in all its forms.²

It is precisely the derivatives of the root (*H B B*), such as the noun (*ḥubb*, *maḥabba*) and the verb (*aḥabba*), that in the Koranic text are given a new semantic expansion, acquiring new meaning when human love is directed to God (*Allāh*). In fact, the Koranic text describes the objects of natural love (women, children, possessions, etc.) as 'enjoyment of the present life' (*al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*), joys that are not complete and permanent. Thus, the Koran intends to turn people away from such earthly, ephemeral joys in describing the joys of Paradise in the nearness of God, joys that are better, true and permanent. Therefore, it is towards those true joys that the believers should orient their *ḥubb* (love-passion), which is now rooted in faith (*īmān*) and a consequence of it. Through this new orientation, human love acquires new dimensions, becoming a 'religious' love, namely love of/for God unknown to pre-Islamic thought.

The question of the origin of Sufi language in general, and that of the Sufi language of love in particular, has been widely discussed since Louis Massignon (d. 1962) published his work: "*Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique islamique*" (Paris, 1922), and Paul Nwyia (d. 1980) continued it in his "*Exegèse coranique et langage mystique*" (Beyrouth, 1970).³ Nobody denies now that Sufi language has its origins in the Koranic text. The question is to show the way it started and developed from it.

Louis Massignon upheld the idea that Sufi language has derived directly from the Koranic language and has been developed particularly through the

¹ This saying is quoted in DAFA III, 1996a as a proverb, while it appears as hadīth in A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1936-1969: I, 409a (al-Dārimī, *adab* 116).

² DAFA III, 1996a-b.

³ Louis Massignon, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, Cerf, Paris, 1999 (1ed. Geuthner, Paris, 1922; Vrin, Paris, 1954); Paul Nwyia, *Exegèse coranique et langage mystique*, Dar al-Machreq, Beyrouth, 1970.



technique of *istinbāt* (i.e., delving into the deep meaning of a word by the technique of repetitive meditation). Paul Nwyia, instead, pointed to the weight of Sufis' personal experience as a basic factor from which a new language was formed and a deep semantic change occurred. Sufi experience is in his view: "...an existential analysis in that it construes the real by bringing it up to the light of consciousness so that experience and language are born in the same act".

¹ However, the question of the origin of Sufi language seems to be more complicated.

The relation between the Sufi and the Koranic languages of love can be easily perceived in many Sufi utterances on love. Famous is the saying of an early Sufi, *Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī* (d. 245/859), who in a prayer said: "O God, in public I call Thee 'My Lord (*rabb*)'; but in solitude I call Thee 'My Beloved (*ḥabīb*)'".²

(إلهي أدعوك في المأ كما تُدعى الأرباب، وأدعوك في الخلا كما تُدعى الأحاب)

The first invocation (*rabb*) comes in accordance with the Koranic style-language: God is the name of public invocation! The second invocation (*ḥabīb*) comes in accordance with the Sufi experience: God has now become the intimate Beloved, therefore it is with this name that in private the Sufi opens his heart to Him!

In an article dedicated to this topic, Giuseppe Scattolin has pointed out that statistically the derivatives of the root (*H B B*) in the Koran occur in a quite limited frequency (only 83 times), if compared with other roots, such as (*R H M*), (*M N*) (*B D*), which have a much higher frequency.³

In fact, the Academy of Arabic Language (Cairo), explaining the meaning of love (*ḥubb*) and its derivatives in the Koran, gives as its first synonym the "inclination (*mayl*) of the soul towards what appears to it, or it believes, to be good". Then, speaking of the love (*ḥubb*) of God towards humans it explains:

¹ "Elle est une analyse existentielle en ce sens qu'elle fait le réel en le conduisant à la lumière de la conscience, de sorte qu'expérience et langage prennent naissance dans le même acte", Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique*, 4.

² Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038), *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'*, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, Cairo, 1351-1357/1932-1938, Beirut, 1400/1980: "Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī" vol. 9, 332; reported in Giuseppe Scattolin-Aḥmed Hasan, *Al-taḡalliyāt al-rūḥiyyat fī-l-Islām*, Al-Hay'at al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li-l-Kitāb, Cairo, 2008 (A historical anthology of Sufi texts in Arabic), 133.

³ Giuseppe Scattolin, "Love (*ḥubb*) of God in Islamic Mysticism - a Study of a Semantic Development: 1- Love (*ḥubb*) of God in the Koran" in *MIDEO* 23 (1997), 239-258.



“...that he (God) is satisfied (*riḍā*) with him (his servant)”. And speaking of the love (*ḥubb*) of humans towards God it explains: “...that he (man) proclaims the greatness (*taʿzīm*) of God and asks to come near to him through the acts of obedience (*tāʿa*)”.¹

This is also true for two basic texts, that have been overused by Sufis to prove that their personal and reciprocal love with God is found in the Koranic text:

"Say, if you love God (*tuḥibbūna Allāh*), follow me: God will love you (*yuḥbib-kum*) and forgive your sins; God is indeed forgiver and merciful". (K 3, 31).

(قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ) [سورة آل عمران، الآية: 31]

"O you, who believe! If some of you draw back (from your religion) God will call in other people (*qawm*), whom he loves and who love him (*yuḥibbu-hum wa-yuḥibbūna-hu*): (they will be) humble with the believers, but fierce with unbelievers, fighting in the way of God (*yuḡāhidūna fī sabīli llāh*) ..." (K 5, 54).

(يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَنْ يَرْتَدَّ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَسَوْفَ يَأْتِي اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ أَذِلَّةٌ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٌ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ) [سورة المائدة، الآية: 54]

After the Koran one has to look for the semantic extension of the language of love in the hadīth literature, which, after the Koran, is recognized as the second source for Islamic piety. In a research on this topic, it is found that in the hadīth literature there is a clear semantic development of love language, compared with that of the Koran.²

In hadīth literature, love (*ḥubb*) is described as a fairly deep experience of intimate friendship linking together different persons, God and his faithful servants, certain special groups of people, creating among them a ‘chain’ or, say, a ‘circle’ of love. Reciprocity in love is highlighted in such hadīths also by the

¹ *Muʿgam alfāz al-Qurʿān*, vol. I, 243-245.

² Giuseppe Scattolin, “Love (*ḥubb*) of God in Islamic Mysticism II: Love (*ḥubb*) of God in the Hadīth - a Study of a Semantic Development”, in *MIDEO* 27 (2008), 131-167.



usage of the reciprocal verbal form 'mutual love' (*taḥābba*) and the almost technical expression 'the mutual lovers in God' (*al-muthābbuna fī-llāh*), forms that do not appear in the Koranic text.

Many examples of such a 'new language' of love can be found in hadīths, such as: "If someone loves to meet God, God will love (*aḥabba*) to meet him (*liqā'*)"; "He loves (*yuhibbu*) God and his Messenger, therefore God and his Messenger love him (*yuhibbu-hu*)..."¹; and so: "When God loves (*aḥabba*) somebody... the people of heaven will love (*fa-yuhibbu-hu*) him too"; "...God will love him (*aḥabba-hu*) and the people of heaven will love him too (*aḥabba-hu*)"; "... if someone loves (*aḥabba-hum*) them, God will love him (*aḥabba-hu*)"; "... if someone loves me (*aḥabba-nī*), let people love him too (*fa-l-yuhibba-hu*)..."; and the chain may continue without end: "I love him (*uḥibbu-hu*), therefore love him (*fa-aḥibba-hu*) and love (*wa-aḥibba*) the ones who love him (*man yuhibbu-hu*)..."²

In some hadīths love appears to be not only a consequence of a previous love, but it becomes, as it were, instrumental. In other words, it is 'through it' that people love each other. This is clearly expressed in hadīths such as: "So, if someone loves them, it is through my love (*bi-ḥubb-ī*) that he loves them"; "I love him in God (*fī-llāh*)... so, he loves you with the same love you have (*bi-ḥubbi-ka*) for him in Him (God)"³. In some beautiful invocations, the pious servants of God proclaim: "O God, we love with your love the ones who love you (*nuḥibbu bi-ḥubbi-ka man aḥabba-ka*)"; and "O God, love him and love the one who loves him"⁴. Here one can say that love reaches its climax in the hadīth vocabulary. Love is not just an exterior bond linking people together, but it becomes, as it were, an 'inner principle', creating among them a new reciprocal and intimate relationship. One could almost speak here of a 'Divine' love, i.e., 'Divine' in its origin, action, strength and purpose, uniting people in a sort of spiritual 'community' or, say, a spiritual friendship of love. In fact, it is a love 'for and through God' (*fī-bi-llāh*).

¹ *Concordance* I, 406a (Muslim, *ḍikr* 14-18); I 406b (al-Tirmidī, *ḡihād* 26).

² *Concordance* I, 406a (al-Buḥārī, *adab* 41); I, 406b (Ibn Ḥanbal 3, 218); *ibid.* (al-Buḥārī, *manāqib al-anṣār* 4); *ibid.* (Ibn Ḥanbal 5, 366); I, 407b (Muslim, *faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba* 57-59).

³ *Concordance* I, 406b (al-Tirmidī, *manāqib* 58); I 408a (Ibn Ḥanbal 3, 393).

⁴ *Concordance* I, 408a (al-Tirmidī, *da'awāt* 30); *ibid.* (al-Buḥārī, *buyū'* 49).



Such remarkable semantic development is, in our view, an expression of a new experience of love, as a link of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘community life’, by which some people felt to be united in a bond of reciprocal friendship and intimacy. Only such spiritual experience can give account for such remarkable semantic development of the language of love in the hadīths. Thus, the hadīth material confirm beyond doubt the growth of an intense spiritual life that came about in some Sufi circles during the first two centuries of Islam, which is confirmed by historical sources. In these hadīths, in fact, one finds an echo of what has transpired in the Islamic community, especially in its ‘ascetic circles’ at that time. A comparison of the two genres of love language, that of hadīth and that of Sufis, shows many similarities and correspondences. Here, one can verify the principle that the development of language is “the fruit and witness” of a corresponding development of experience: language is, as it were, the mirror of experience. In the present instance, only the milieu and the lifestyle of those first circles of ‘pious and ascetic servants-worshippers of God (*zuhhād-‘ubbād*)’ can account for the development of such a new vocabulary of love as witnessed in the hadīth material.

It is also important to underline the role these hadīths played in the formation of later Sufi language and experience. Such hadīths have been transmitted as sayings of the Prophet, and as such they enjoyed full authority, becoming very early part of the Islamic spirituality in general, and that of Sufis in particular. In this way the hadīth material also offered an accepted ‘scriptural’ basis that, together with the Koranic text, had great influence in the development of Sufi experience and language. A lot of these hadīths, in fact, will be later on reported in the classical manuals of Sufism, such as the *Risāla fī ‘ilm al-taṣawwuf* of Abū al-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī (d. 465/1072), *Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn* of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111) and others, becoming a main source of Sufi experience. Through them, Sufis could always claim to have secure and solid ground in the tradition that could justify their innovative usage of ‘erotic’ language with respect to God.

One can see here that the question of the origin of the love language in Sufism is quite complex, and different factors have played into it. Certainly, there was a basic reference to the Koranic text, its continuous reading and repetitive meditation (*istinbāt*), as L. Massignon affirmed. But, one must take into account also the hadīth literature and its deep influence on Sufi life. All this



must be taken into account together with the personal experience of the first ascetics, and the development of spiritual life that was uniting them. In this way, as P. Nwyia states, a new language has been formed in Arabic language, a language of experience, i.e., the Sufi language in general, and the Sufi language of love in particular.

After this overview on the origin of the religious language of love in Islam, we examine now the history of Sufism in order to follow at closer range the development of the experience, concept and language of love in it. This is quite a vast field of research, and in the present research only some traits can be highlighted, drawing up a broad outline of the historical context against which the Sufi presented here, should be read and understood. For further information one should go through specialized literature.¹

1. Love in the First Ascetic Movement (I-II/VII-VIII c.).²

The first manifestation of Sufism is represented by the ascetic movement of the first two centuries of Islam. This movement arose as a reaction against the life of luxury and corruption that made its way into the Islamic society, enriched by the recent world conquests (*futūḥāt*). This ascetic movement called for a return to the primitive Koranic message and the simple life of the Prophet, against the corrupted and worldly life that had infiltrated Islamic society, and was the cause of civil wars and division within the Islamic community. Those ascetics stressed the importance of returning to some important religious virtues, such as prayer, poverty, renouncement, spiritual retreat. All this can be seen in the teaching of the great preacher of Basra (in Iraq today), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), who is considered the most outstanding representative of that early ascetic movement. His preferred topics were: meditation (*tafakkur*), repentance (*tawba*), renouncement (*zuhd*), poverty (*faqr*), knowledge of hearts (*'ilm al-qulūb*) obtained through a careful examination (*muḥāsaba*) of conscience, scrupulosity (*wara'*) in keeping all the prescriptions of the law even the smallest ones, sadness (*ḥuzn*) and fear (*ḥawf*) at the constant thought of death and God's judgement, constant contrition (*nadam*), and so on. Love has almost no place in

¹ Many texts reported here are from *Al-taḡalliyāt*, op. cit.; Giuseppe Scattolin, *Esperienze mistiche in Islam*, EMI, Bologna, vols. I-III, 1994-2000, (an anthology of Sufi texts in Italian). Dates are given are first in Egirian, followed by the Christian numeration.

² *Al-taḡalliyāt*, 51-77.



his vocabulary. Nonetheless, al-Hasan al-Basrī is credited as the transmitter of a famous hadīth on the reciprocal love (*'iṣq*) between God and his servant.¹ It is interesting to note that here the non-Koranic term (but occurring in hadīth) *'iṣq* is used, instead of the Koranic *ḥubb-maḥabba*. Was it to avoid any similarity with Christian vocabulary, as its reporter 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. 177/793) used to say? In this hadīth it is said that the remembrance (*dīkr*) of God is the source of mutual love (*'iṣq*) between God and his servant, and this love leads to the lifting of veil (*kaṣf al-ḥiḡāb*) between them so that the servant might see (*ru'ya*) his Lord at his will. This connection between remembrance (*dīkr*) of God, love (*'iṣq-ḥubb*), lifting of the veils (*kaṣf al-ḥiḡāb/ḥuḡub*), and vision (*ru'ya*) will become quite common in Sufi literature.

2. The Beginning of the Path of Pure Love (II/VIII c.): Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya.²

However, it was during the II/VII century that the theme of pure and absolute love for God first appeared and expanded in Islamic mysticism to the point of becoming one of its central topics. A typical representative of such new breakthrough was a female mystic, the celebrated Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801). She was the first person in Islam to make of the experience of absolute and exclusive love for God the center of her Sufi life. Such love requires a radical renunciation not only to all worldly things, but also to any desire of reward (Paradise) or fear of punishment (Hell) in the afterlife. "God must be loved for His own sake, and for no other purpose", was her constant refrain. Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya has been called in Sufi tradition (Farīduddīn 'Aṭṭār, d. ca. 587/1190) the 'second Maryam', because of the purity of her love, and because she was the one who introduced into Islam the way of 'pure and absolute love' for God. One should not necessarily see in such love some foreign influence, e.g., from Christianity, as someone may think. Asked: "How did you reach such a lofty level of spiritual life?", Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya answered in very Koranic terms: "By saying constantly: 'O God, I take refuge in Thee from whatever may take me away from Thee and may be an obstacle between me and Thee'.³

¹ Massignon, *Essai*, 195-196.

² *Al-taḡalliyāt*, 78-85.

³ *Al-taḡalliyāt*, p. 81; *Esperienze mistiche* I, p. 55.



(سئلت رابعة: كيف بلغت هذه المرتبة العالية في الحياة الروحية، فأجابت: بقولي دائما اللهم
إني أعوذ بك من كل ما يشغلني، ومن كل حائل يحول بيني وبينك).

One could even say that in Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya the Koranic formula of faith: "There is no God but the Allāh", was given a new meaning and translated into the profession of the unicity of love (*tawhīd al-ḥubb*): "There is no Beloved (*maḥbūb*) but the God (*Allāh*)". Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya expressed her deep feelings in short poem in which her whole experience of love for God is summarized. This poem has become one of the most famous texts in Sufi history.¹

I love you out of two loves (*ḥubb*):
One is the result of my passion (*hawā*),
The other is the one only You deserve.

The love of passion happens when I make myself busy
Only with Your remembrance (*dīkr*),
Excluding everything else that is not You.

The love only You deserve
Occurs when you lift (*kašf*) the veils (*ḥuḡub*)
So that I see you (*ru'ya*).

No praise goes to me in this (love) or that,
But to You all praise is due,
Both in this (love) and that.

وَحُبًّا لِأَنَّكَ أَهْلٌ لِيذَاكَ	أُحِبُّكَ حُبِّينِ: حُبَّ الْهَوَى
فَشُغْلِي بِذِكْرِكَ عَمَّنْ سِوَاكَ	فَأَمَّا الَّذِي هُوَ حُبُّ الْهَوَى
فَكَشْفُكَ لِي الْحُجُبِ حَتَّى أَرَكَ	وَأَمَّا الَّذِي أَنْتَ أَهْلٌ لَهُ
وَلَكِنْ لَكَ الْحَمْدُ فِي ذَا وَذَاكَ	فَلَا الْحَمْدُ فِي ذَا وَلَا ذَاكَ لِي

¹ *Al-taḡalliyāt*, p. 85; *Esperienze mistiche* I, p. 59-60.



In this poem some basic terms appear that will have a lasting influence in the Sufi language. They are connected in the following sequence: remembrance (*dikr*), love (*ḥubb*)-passion (*hawā*), lift (*kašf*) the veils (*ḥiḡāb/ḥuḡub*), vision (*ru'ya*). The same terms, in the same sequence appear in the hadīth of love (*'išq*) transmitted by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, as mentioned above.

With Rābi'a some other contemporary Sufis should be mentioned, who expressed their Sufi experience in similar terms. Among them is Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 160/776), a great ascetic from Khurāsān, who centered his ascetic life in the practice of poverty (*faqr*).¹ He too developed a language of love based on the concepts of friendship (*ḥulla*), intimate knowledge (*ma'rifa*), love (*maḥabba*); recollection of God's name (*dikr*), silence (*ṣamt*), and at the end in the vision (*ru'ya*) of God, as He says: "...If he comes to Me, I will raise the veils between him and Me, and he will contemplate Me at his leisure".²

(.... فإذا جاءني رفعت الحجاب بيني وبينه، فينظر إليّ كيف يشاء)

Also the sixth Shiite *imām*, Ġa'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765), must be mentioned because of the role he played in the formation of Sufi language.³ In his *tafsīr* he proposes four levels of readings of the Koranic text:⁴

- i - the literal meaning or expression (*'ibāra*), proper to the common believers (*al-a'wāmm*);
- ii - the inner meaning or allusion (*išāra*), proper to the special people (*al-ḥawāss*);
- iii - the subtle meanings (*laṭā'if*), proper to the friends-saints of God (*al-awliyā'*);
- iv - the deepest divine realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), proper to the prophets (*al-anbiyā'*).

(كتاب الله على أربعة أشياء: العبارة والإشارة واللطائف والحقائق)

فالعبرة للعوام، والإشارة للخواص، واللطائف للأولياء، والحقائق للأنبياء)

¹ *Al-taḡalliyāt*, 72-77; *Esperienze mistiche I*, 50-53.

² Massignon, *Essai*, 256-258; *Esperienze mistiche I*, 53.

³ Nwyia, *Exegèse*, p. 156-207.

⁴ Paul Nwyia, *Le tafsīr mystique attribué à Ġa'far Šādiq*, Édition critique, Imprimerie Catholique, Beyrouth, 1968.



Ğa'far al-Şādiq shows quite a developed language of love. In his *tafsīr* he describes Moses' encounter with God as the encounter of the lover (*ḥabīb*) with his Beloved (*ḥabīb*), with all the signs of love (*maḥabba*). He proposes a definition of love which echoes throughout in many Sufi sayings. He says: "... (love is) the devouring fire of God, which consumes every aspiration which is not for God and any remembrance which is not his (of God)".¹

(نيران المحبة إذا اتقدت في قلوب المؤمنين تحرق كل هم غير الله)

In this saying, love is connected with the idea of 'consuming fire', that anticipates the idea of 'annihilation' (*fanā*'), common in many Sufi expressions.

3. Towards a Mysticism of Union (III-IV/IX-X c.): al-Ḥallāğ.²

The III/IX c. was period of an extraordinary flourishing of Sufis who expressed their experience with a great deal of freedom, at least until al-Ḥallāğ's trial. Many Sufis became now increasingly aware that the path of love, if followed to its extreme consequences, ultimately leads to union (*wahda*). The lover, indeed, yearns for only one thing, the union with his Beloved, and the greater the love (and is there a greater love than God's, as Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya has shown?), the more profound is the ensuing union. Themes and speculations concerning union with God, its causes and its effects, are increasingly developed throughout this period. Among prominent Sufis such as al-Ḥārīṭ al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859), love becomes a major topic. Al-Muḥāsibī, though much concerned with the exercise of the 'examination of conscience' (*muḥāsaba*), has left a very interesting 'chapter on love', in which some of the basic qualities and consequences of love are described.³ Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī has developed a fine analysis and very colourful language about love, its stages and moods.⁴ But, the one who first introduced a new dimension in the topic of love was undoubtedly the 'master of Sufi people' (*šayḥ al-tā'ifa*) and the 'master of unity' (*tawḥīd*), Abū al-Qāsim al-Ġunayd (d. 298/910).⁵ He is the first

¹ Nwyia, *Le tafsīr mystique*, p. 229.

² *Al-tağalliyāt*, 100-201; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 61-62.

³ *Al-tağalliyāt*, 125-128; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 69-74.

⁴ *Al-tağalliyāt*, 129-135; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 62-69.

⁵ Abū al-Qāsim al-Ġunayd, a Sufi of Baghdad, called 'the Master of the (Sufi) Group' (*sayyid al-tā'ifa*), is considered one of the highest authorities in Sufism. He left only some treatises (*rasā'il*),



Sufi to have described love in terms of an ‘exchanging of qualities’ (*tabādul al-ṣifāt*) in his famous definition of love: “Love is that the qualities of the Beloved (*ḥabīb*) take the place of the qualities of the lover (*muḥibb*)”.¹

(المحبة: دخول صفات المحبوب بدلا من صفات المحب)

Al-Ġunayd developed also another central topic of Sufism, that of ‘annihilation’ (*fanāʾ*) of the servant (*ʿabd*) of God in God, meaning that all his personal qualities are completely obliterated and annihilated in God’s qualities. The servant is no more the agent (*fāʾil*) but only the ‘acted upon’ (*mafʾūl*); God is the unique, absolute agent (*fāʾil*). Since al-Ġunayd the two terms, love (*ḥubb-maḥabba*) and annihilation (*fanāʾ*), will always be strictly connected in Sufi language and experience. Such ideas will have a most profound impact on Sufi speculation on love, starting with al-Ġunayd’s renowned disciple, the Sufi martyr, al-Ḥallāğ.

Al-Husayn b. Mansūr al-Ḥallāğ (d. 309/922) is considered the major representative of Sufism of love in this period.² He managed to make a remarkable synthesis between deep personal experience and daring Sufi thought. Deepening his speculation on the reality of the human being created in God’s image (*ṣūra*), al-Ḥallāğ puts love (*ḥubb-maḥabba*) at the center of the

in which he expressed his Sufi vision in very careful wording so as to avoid any misinterpretation. He was the first Sufi who gave a complete vision or theory of Sufi experience, going from the pre-eternal covenant (*mīṭāq*) (mentioned in K 7, 172), through complete self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*) up to permanence (*baqāʾ*) in God’s vision. He established his Sufi vision on the solid basis of Islamic tradition: Koran and Sunna, avoiding any exaggerated expression of unity (*ṣaṭḥāt*), uttered in state of inebriation (*sukr*); see *Al-tağalliyāt*, 167-182; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 93-102.

¹ *Al-tağalliyāt*, 168; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 96; the saying is reported in Abū l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Quṣayrī (d. 465/1074), *Al-risālat al-quṣayriyya*, edited by ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Šarīf, Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīṭa, 1972-1974 (1st ed. 1385/1966): vol. 2, 615.

² Al-Husayn b. Mansūr al-Ḥallāğ was born in Fāris (central Iran) in 244/858. He became a disciple of some the most prominent Sufis of the time (among them al-Ġunayd), then he went out openly preaching his love and unity with God. Accused of heresy and suspected of being a revolutionary acting against the caliphate, he was executed in Baghdad in 309/922, after a long and famous trial. He left a *Dīwān* and some other compositions. Al-Ḥallāğ has become the symbol of the Sufi martyr in Islam. For a deeper study see Louis Massignon, *La passion d'al-Housayn Ibn-Mansour al-Hallāj, martyr mystique de l'Islam*, Paris, Geuthner, 1922, 2 vols.; Id., *La passion de Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'Islam*, Paris, Gallimard (ed. rev.), 1975, 4 vols. For texts, see *Al-tağalliyāt*, p. 183-201; *Esperienze mistiche* I, p. 103-132.



relationships between God and the human being. In one of his meditations he says: “God was contemplating Himself from His pre-eternity in His perfection, before manifestation... Then, He turned towards His attribute of love-desire (*'iṣq*); and this attribute (*ṣifa*) was also a form in His Essence, and it was His essence (*hiya dātu-hu*). ...and all this conversation was from Himself, in Himself and for Himself (*min dāti-hi fī dāti-hi wa-li-dāti-hi*)”.¹

Therefore, love requires and leads to union. In such union, the ‘self’ of the Sufi becomes completely absorbed by God and in God, and God becomes now the only true agent in the Sufi, doing everything in him. Starting from this premise, al-Ḥallāğ plunged deeply in this new opening of love, that he emerged with his famous utterance: “I am the Truth-Reality (*anā al-ḥaqq*)”, through which he could express the summit of his experience of love and unity. Such a daring expression of union with God exposed al-Ḥallāğ to a long trial that lead him to his execution, accepted by him as a supreme sign of the truthfulness (*ṣidq*) of his mystical experience. Different explanations have been given to al-Ḥallāğ’s expression. Al-Ḥallāğ has been accused of upholding the idea of ‘monism’ (in Arabic *waḥdat al-wuğūd*), in which the difference between God and creature is somewhat obliterated. Such assertion has always been strongly condemned by orthodox Sunnis in Islam. But, was al-Ḥallāğ actually an upholder of true monism? Many scholars now doubt such a traditional understanding of him. Others have compared Ḥallāğ’s expression with that of Mağnūn Laylā, who used to proclaim: “I am Laylā (*anā Laylā*)”, to express his total union with his beloved Laylā. It is known that Mağnūn had been adopted by

¹ The text is attributed to al-Ḥallāğ by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī (d. 422/1030), *Kitāb a’f al-alif al-ma’lūf ‘alā al-lām al-ma’tūf*, ed. by Jean-Claude Vadet, IFAO, Cairo, 1962, 24-29; see *Al-tağalliyāt*, 312-315; Louis Massignon, *La passion d'al-Housayn*, II, 604; Id., *La passion de Hallaj*, 1975, III, p. 113-114; Id., ‘Interferences philosophiques et percées métaphysiques dans la mystique hallagienne: Notion de “l’essentiel désir”’, *Opera Minora*, Beirut, Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1963, II, 232-236; Jean-Claude Vadet, *Le traité d’amour mystique d’al-Daylami*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1980, 65-66. L. Massignon remarks that al-Daylamī uses both terms, desire (*'iṣq*) and love (*maḥabba*), while al-Ḥallāğ preferred to talk of ‘desire’ (*'iṣq*), but of the ‘essential desire’ (*'iṣq dātī*) as an essential quality in God, but as God’s essence. Philosophical sources, such as Heraclitus (d. 475 BC) and Empedocles (d. 430 BC.) are mentioned by al-Daylamī as sources of Sufi speculations. Continuing his Ḥallāğian meditation, al-Daylamī affirms that there is a triad of love in God: “He loved Himself, in Himself and for Himself. So there was the Lover, the Beloved and Love as one thing without any division in Him, (who is) pure Unity, in whom can not possibly coexist more than one thing”, L. Massignon., ‘La notion de “l’essentiel désir”’, *Opera Minora*, II, 235; Vadet, *Le traité*, 78-79.



Sufis as the symbol of a Sufi intoxicated love by the love of God, who in ecstasy would utter abnormal, shocking, or, more exactly, theopathic expressions (*šatahāt*). Such psychological explanations have been given by many Sunni Sufis, like al-Ġazālī. Louis Massignon, on his part, explains the *ḥulūl*, a key-concept of al-Ḥallāġ's vision, saying that it means: "...a *Divine information* in the heart of the saint, who finds himself transported into a permanent state of 'essential union' (*'ayn al-ġam'*), where – after the transformation of his *ṣifāt* – he finds himself 'transubstantiated' in Divine essence – without confusion or destruction – acquiring in this way his definitive, supreme *Anā*".¹ Such metamorphose happens through the union of two spirits, the Divine Spirit with the saint, achieved through love (*ḥubb*).

Al-Ḥallāġ, in fact, intended to go to the extreme and logical consequences of the demands of love, as it was understood and developed in Sufi circles: true love demands that lover and beloved become one. Only this is true love. Thus, intoxicated by such an experience, al-Ḥallāġ could proclaim his complete unity with his Beloved in a famous poem that has become a basic reference for Sufi love:²

I am the One I love, and the One I love is I;
We are two spirits dwelling in a single body.

If you see me, you see Him;
If you see Him, you see us.

أَنَا مَنْ أَهْوَى وَمَنْ أَهْوَى أَنَا نَحْنُ رُوحَانِ حَلَّانَا بَدْنَا
فَإِذَا أَبْصَرْتَنِي أَبْصَرْتَهُ وَإِذَا أَبْصَرْتَهُ أَبْصَرْتَنَا

One could even say that in this way al-Ḥallāġ was simply expressing at existential and experimental level precisely the basic dogma of Sunni theology that had prevailed against the Mu'tazilites's position. According to the Sunni dogma, God is the absolute actor (*fā'il*) and to Him belongs all agency (*fā'iliyya*), with the negation of any true action on the part of His creatures. Such dogma had already been elaborated before al-Ḥallāġ by his master, al-Ġunayd, in his reflection upon the highest degree of *tawḥīd*, as shown above. True *tawḥīd*

¹ L. Massignon, '*Anā al-Ḥaqq – Étude historique et critique sur un formule dogmatique de théologie mystique*', *Opera Minora*, II, p. 34.

² *Al-taġalliyāt*, p. 185; *Esperienze mistiche* I, p. 127.



requires that the servant's ('*abd*) action be completely overwhelmed by God's power (called by al-Ġunayd *galaba*), and the servant become in His hands like a shadow (*ṣabah*) with no real substance. One can say that in such a vision the Koranic formula of faith: "There is no god but the God (*Allāh*)", already translated by Sufis into: "There is no beloved but God", acquires now, in the speculation of al-Ġunayd and al-Ḥallāġ, a new dimension: "There is no agent (*fā'il*) but the God (*Allāh*)."¹ From such a premise, al-Ḥallāġ could logically conclude that the 'truthful *tawḥīd*' (*tawḥīd al-ṣidq*) can be pronounced only by God, because: "Only God can testify to His own Oneness on the tongue of whomever he wants from his creatures". In fact, when a servant proclaims the *tawḥīd*, he affirms himself, committing the capital sin for Islamic orthodoxy, that of 'associationism or idolatry' (*al-širk*), even if in a 'hidden way' (*al-širk al-ḥāfī*).¹ Therefore, only one who has become one with God can profess the 'truthful *tawḥīd*' (*tawḥīd al-ṣidq*). Sufis, in fact, have always warned against any subtle form of associationism. They have remarked that most believers profess the formula of monotheism (*tawḥīd*) only with their tongues, while their hearts remain full of other things and interests. In their view, this amounts to a sort of idolatry (*širk*).

For this reason, al-Ḥallāġ does not stop praying that God Himself may help him in proclaiming the true attestation of His Oneness (*tawḥīd*), which cannot possibly be the result of any human capacity, only of God's action:²

Make me one with you (*wahḥid-nī*), o my One (*wāḥid-ī*),
In true attestation of your Oneness (*tawḥīd al-ṣidq*):
To it no human path can lead!

I am a true witness (*ḥaqq*),
But only Truth (*ḥaqq*) is
True witness (*ḥaqq*) to the Truth (*ḥaqq*),
Wrapping Himself in Himself.

Now between us, there is no separation!

¹ *Al-taḡalliyāt*, p. 194.

² *Al-taḡalliyāt*, 185; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 125-126; for the first verse there is another version saying: "God has chosen me in a special way (*ḥaṣṣa-nī*) for the true attestation of his Oneness (*tawḥīd al-ṣidq*)...".



All now is brightening, with shining,
Flaring out rays in the flash of lightning.

خَصَّنِي وَاحِدِي بِتَوْحِيدِ صِدْقٍ مَا إِلَيْهِ مِنَ الْمَسَالِكِ طُرُقُ
أَنَا الْحَقُّ وَالْحَقُّ لِلْحَقِّ حَقٌّ لَا يَسُّ ذَاتَهُ فَمَا تَمَّ فَرَقُ
قَدْ تَجَلَّتْ طَوَالِعُ زَاهِرَاتٍ يَتَشَعَّشَعْنَ وَالطَّوَالِعُ بَرَقُ
البيت الثاني أورده ماسينيون: فَأَنَا الْحَقُّ حَقٌّ لِلْحَقِّ حَقٌّ

What al-Ḥallāğ is asking here is that his personal ‘I’ be totally removed and obliterated by God’s personal ‘I’, so that only the latter remains, taking the place of everything. Only at that point the true *tawhīd* can be professed, as he says:¹

Between me and you there is my ‘I’ that makes intrusion,
Remove, by Your ‘I’, my ‘I’ from between us.

بيني وبينك أني يزاحمني فارفع بأتك أنيي من التين

Thus, deepening the position of his master al-Ġunayd, al-Ḥallāğ has clearly seen that love and unity are strictly connected. Starting from love, the Sufi enters into unity, and vice versa, true unity cannot be experienced outside love. Al-Ġunayd’s remark about *tawhīd*: "The further human minds venture out towards the extreme limits of *tawhīd*, the further they venture out into bewilderment."²

(إذا تناهت عقول العقلاء في التوحيد، تناهت إلى الحيرة)

This can be applied to al-Ḥallāğ’s experience of love: ‘The further human hearts venture out towards the extreme limits of love, the further they venture out into bewilderment’. Love is an ocean without shores; the more one goes into it the more one loses oneself up to one’s total obliteration and intoxication. How many times, in fact, does the image of being submerged and lost in the ocean of love occur in Sufi utterances!

¹ *Al-tağalliyāt*, 194.

² *Al-tağalliyāt*, 168; *Esperienze mistiche* II, 16; reported in *Al-risālat al-quṣayriyya*, op. cit., vol. 2, 853.



Here, one can see that the question of *tawhīd* remains at the very heart of Islamic faith and Sufi experience. In fact, in Sufi experience the true *tawhīd* implies a transforming presence of God in the heart of the human being, who must be taken up into the true *tawhīd*, which is the eternal Self-proclamation God Himself makes of His Unity. Since al-Ġunayd and al-Ḥallāġ, the quest for the ‘true *tawhīd*’ has become a basic issue for Sufis. A later strict Hanbalite Sufi, such as ‘Abd al-Allāh Ansārī (d. 481/1088) was, well summarized this question in few verses at the end of his Sufi treatise *The Dwelling Places of Travelers* (*Manāzil al-sā’irīn*), leaving, however, the question open and without any clear solution:¹

No one has proclaimed that the One is One:
Anyone who has done it has been a denier (of God).

The one who speaks of His unity as a quality,
Says idle words that He, the One, makes vain.

That the One proclaims Himself One,
This is the profession of Unity (*tawhīd*).

Whoever wants to qualify Him with the quality of One,
Qualifies himself with impiety.

إِذْ كُلُّ مَنْ وَحَّدَهُ جَاجِدُ	مَا وَحَّدَ الْوَاحِدَ مِنْ وَاحِدٍ
عَارِيَةً أَبْطَلَهَا الْوَاحِدُ	تَوْحِيدُ مَنْ يَنْطِقُ عَنْ نَعْتِهِ
وَنَعْتٌ مَنْ يَنْعَتُهُ لِاحِدُ	تَوْحِيدُهُ إِيَّاهُ تَوْحِيدُهُ

The question remains open: how can a Sufi enter into God’s eternal act of Self-proclamation in which ‘the One proclaims Himself One’? Does the Sufi enter into it by himself, as a result of his ascetic effort and practice of the religious law and spiritual exercises? Or can he reach such state exclusively through God’s grace that takes him up to the ‘face to face’ encounter with God himself, as al-Ḥallāġ proclaimed? This is surely one of the most bewildering

¹ *Al-taġalliyāt*, p. 386; *Esperienze mistiche* II, p. 16.



questions in Sufism. Al-Hallāğ has clearly indicated the ‘royal path of love’ (*madhab al-ḥubb*) as the only way that leads to complete union with his utmost Beloved, God, and this up to martyrdom. Thus, one can say that: “He is the model of every loving soul who will gladly suffer and die for the sake of his love”.¹

Al-Hallāğ is recognized as one of the major representatives of what is called ‘ecstatic Sufism’. The Sufī, in fact, having gone through the path of love up to the end, experiences the dramatic encounter with the supreme Reality (*al-ḥaqq*). By such a tremendous encounter, he is completely transformed, and his language too is completely remoulded. Now, the Sufī’s expressions sound strange, shocking and even blasphemous to the ordinary believer. But, for the Sufī, they are the only possible utterances in human language of what he is now experiencing. These are the so called ‘theopathic locutions’ (*ṣataḥāt*), because the speaker in them is not the Sufī, but God. These *ṣataḥāt* are one of the most astonishing aspects of Sufī experience, but also the cause of much opposition for Sufis. Such ecstatic Sufism has often been object of hostility, even of persecution on the part of many doctors of Islamic law (*fuqhā’- ‘ulamā’*), who could not accept any idea of real love and unity between a human being and God.

4. Love in Sunni Sufism (IV-V/X-XI c.): al-Ġazālī.²

After al-Hallāğ’s trial, many Sufis felt the need of reviewing their position and tried reconcile it with the dominant Islamic tradition: Sunnism. This is the time in which the first systematic Sufī manuals in the form of treatises (*rasā’il*, literally ‘letters’) on Sufism and biographies (*ṭabaqāt*, literally ‘generations’) of Sufis appeared. A clear apologetic tone can be noticed in them. In fact, their main intent was to show that there is a basic agreement between Sufī experience, already well developed in Islam, and the Islamic law (*sharī’a*), already well established and elaborated in Islamic society. It was, in fact, during the III/IX century that the Islamic *sharī’a* reached its final codification in the four schools of law universally recognized in Islam: the *ḥanafīyya*, the *mālīkiyya*, the *shāfi’iyya* and the *ḥanbaliyya*. The same century witnessed the definitive victory

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1975, p. 75.

² *Esperienze mistiche* II, pp. 5-16.



of Sunni Islam against the Mu'tazilites who by resorting to the use of reason ('*aql*) tried to free religion from the grip of blind repetitive tradition (*taqlīd*).

Here, some of the most outstanding Sufi authors of that time with their works are mentioned.

a> Among the Sufi biographers are:

Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1201), author of *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (*The Generations of Sufis*), one of the first biographical books of Sufis.

Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038), author of *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* (*The Ornament of the Friends-Saints of God*), a very large compendium of Sufi biographies in 10 volumes.

'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), author of *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (*The Generations of Sufis*) (one of the first Sufi composition in Persian).

Farīduddīn al-Aṭṭār (d. ca. 587/1190, and not 627/1229 as usually reported), author of *Tadkirat al-awliya'* (*The Memorial of the Friends-Saints of God*) (also in Persian), a very popular biographical book of Sufis (in Persian).

b> Among the authors of Sufi manuals are:

Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāḡ (d. 378/988), author of *Kitāb al-luma' fī l-taṣawwuf* (*The Book of Flashes on Sufism*), a first and basic reference for Sufi science and terminology.

Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī (d. 380/990 or 384/994), author of *Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-maḍhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (*The Book of Knowledge of Sufis*), a short and popular manual of Sufism.

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), author of *Qūt al-qulūb* (*The Nourishment of the Hearts*), a large popular Sufi manual.

'Abd al-Mālik al-Ḥarkūšī (d. 407/1016), author of *Tahḍīb al-asrār* (*The Refinement of the [Soul's] Secrets*), a substantial collection of Sufi sayings.

Abū l-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī (d. 465/1072), author of *Al-risāla fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf* (*The Treatise on the Science of Sufism*), usually known as *Al-risāla al-quṣayriyya* (*The Treatise of al-Quṣayrī*), a most popular manual of Sufism;

Abū l-Ḥasan al-Huḡwīrī (d. 465/1073 or 469/1077), author of *Kaṣf al-maḡḡūb li-*arbāb al-qulūb** (*The Unveiling of the Veiled for the People of Hearts*), the first treatise on Sufism in Persian.

'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), author of *Kitāb manāzil al-sā'irīn* (*The Book*



of the Stations of the Spiritual Travellers); also a well known manual of Sufism.

Through these writings a great number of sayings coming from the first generations of Sufis and of many prominent Sufi masters (*šuyūḥ*), recognized as reliable authorities in Islamic spirituality, have been handed down to us. From these sayings one can form a quite good picture of the development of Sufi language throughout history. These sayings constitute all together what has been called ‘Sunni Sufism’, i.e., a Sufi trend, basically accepted in Islamic Sunnism. In all these compositions the topic love (*ḥubb-maḥabba*) is given a prominent place, listed among the main stages of the Sufi path, but, in Sufis such as al-Quṣayrī and al-Ġazālī, love is the highest state in Sufi experience.

Among them all, the great Ash’arite theologian, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), is considered the most outstanding representative of Sunni Sufism. For his undisputed orthodoxy, he has been designated with the title ‘proof of Islam’ (*ḥuḡḡat al-islām*).¹ Al-Ġazālī himself went through a deep Sufi experience in which only, as he states, could he find that inner certainty (*yaqīn*) and tranquillity of soul (*tuma’nīna*), he could not find either in philosophical (*falsafa*) speculations or in theological (*kalām*) disputes. In his book *Salvation from Perdition* (*Al-munqid min al-ḍalāl*), al-Ġazālī describes his conversion to Sufism, expressing his strong criticism of both philosophical and theological sciences. From such a premise, one can understand why al-Ġazālī in his *summa* of Islamic Sunnism, his famous *Revivification of Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ulum al-dīn*), put the Sufi way as the summit of Islamic religious life (Part IV of the book), and in it love of God as the apex of Sufi perfection.² In this chapter,

¹ Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ġazālī al-Ṭūṣī was born in 450/1058 in Ṭūṣ, a town of Ḥurāsān (Oriental Iran, near modern Meshhed), and became a renowned professor of *kalām* in the Niẓāmiyya school of Baghdad. In 488/1095, he suddenly left his position and entered the Sufi path, persisting in it till the end of his life. There, in the practice of pious and ascetic life, he found that inner certainty (*yaqīn*) he did not find in theoretical sciences, such as philosophy and *kalām*. He passed away in Ṭūṣ, his native town, in 505/1111. Al-Ġazālī left a great number of works, among them his famous theological *summa*, *Iḥyā’ ulum al-dīn* (*The Revivification of Religious Sciences*); the personal account of his conversion *Al-Munqid min al-ḍalāl*, (*Salvation from Error*); a treatise on mystical light *Miškāt al-anwār*, (*The Niche of Lights*); see *Al-taḡalliyāt*, 392-439; *Esperienze mistiche* III, 157-175.

² See his chapter on love (*maḥabba*), *Al-taḡalliyāt*, pp. 410-434; *Esperienze mistiche* III, p. 218-244.



al-Ġazālī analyses five causes of love, saying that all of them must be applied to God at their highest level.

1. The first reason: everybody loves one's own existence, perfection and subsistence; therefore, one must love God who is the cause and source of one's being.
2. The second reason: everybody loves the benefactor (*muḥsin*) who grants him life and protects him from all dangers; therefore one must love God, who does good to all.
3. The third reason: everybody loves one who is known for being the best benefactor of all; therefore, one must love God who is the greatest of all benefactors.
4. The fourth reason: everybody loves all that is beautiful (*ḡamīl*) in itself; therefore, one must love God who is the most beautiful and the source of all beauty (*ḡamāl*).
5. The fifth reason: everybody loves one's own simile; therefore, one must love God out of an 'inner affinity' (*munāsaba*) that exists between the human being and God.

Al-Ġazālī elaborates on this last reason, which is the most important one for God's love. He explains that such affinity existing between the human being and God is based on three fundamental ideas found in the Islamic tradition. The human being, in fact, is designated in Islamic tradition as the 'viceregent of God' (*ḡalīfat Allāh*); 'image of God' (*ṣūrat Allāh*), and the being into which the 'Spirit of God' (*rūḡ Allāh*) has been breathed. At this point, however, al-Ġazālī strongly condemns what he calls the exaggerations of many Sufi's sayings, like those of al-Bistāmī, al-Ḥallāḡ. In his mind, those Sufis have gone too far in speaking of real union (*waḡda*) with God, or of the inhabitation (*ḡulūl*) of God in the human being, and other similar expressions. Al-Ġazālī intends to keep Sufism in the line with Sunni orthodoxy, avoiding any shadow of misunderstanding and suspicion. Therefore, he takes pains in explaining that love can only lead to some closeness (*qurb*) to God, and such closeness must not be understood either as closeness of space, or as real unity and identification with God, or as God's inhabitation in the human being, as many Sufis pretended. Al-Ġazālī explicitly declares that: "What can be mentioned [of such a state] is only the servant's closeness (*qurb*) to the Lord, the Powerful and Sublime, in the attributes that he was commanded



to imitate, and in conforming to the qualities of his Lord, so that it was said: 'Conform to the qualities of God'.¹

(فالذى يذكر هو قرب العبد من ربه عز وجل في الصفات التي أمر فيها الإقتداء
والتخلق بأخلاق الربوبية، حتى قيل تخلقوا بأخلاق الله)

Thus, the servant's closeness (*qurb*) to God only means in al-Ġazālī's view 'imitation of Divine qualities', an approach well understood and accepted in the Islamic traditional practice of the recitation of God's 'beautiful names' (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*). With this purpose, al-Ġazālī wrote a book explaining the meaning of the Divine beautiful names, which should be assimilated by Sufis. He concludes his chapter on love, showing that he is aware of states of ecstasy (*wağd*) and intoxication (*sukr*) that may happen to Sufis, such as what happened to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), who died in an excess of ecstasy. However, al-Ġazālī says, such states must be seen as exaggerations not to be imitated. At the same time, however, he affirms against some strict Sunni doctors that the quality of love must be really attributed to God in its most real meaning, and not just metaphorically. Actually, the only true lover is God, because he is the source of all love. It is our human love that must be ascribed to us metaphorically, while love must be attributed to God in its full and real meaning.

In conclusion, one also has to stress the fact that al-Ġazālī puts love at the highest level in the relationship between God and his servant. Resorting to some philosophical concepts, like that of affinity (*munāsaba*), he could show the depths of such love, connecting it with the sources of Islamic faith. In the same time, however, he took care of establishing clear limits to the experience of Sufi love, trying by all means to avoid any expression that could arouse suspicion or opposition as being against the basic dogma of Islam: *tawḥīd*. Any divinization of human being, even through love, as well as any unity or mixture or identification with God, is absolutely ruled out by Islamic Sunnism. Nonetheless, in some texts al-Ġazālī himself shows that he is aware of 'Sufi secrets', that cannot be proclaimed in public, but must be kept secret to be revealed only to special circles of people, the Sufis. Al-Ġazālī has become over time the most accepted authority of Sunni doctrine and is constantly referred to as the 'proof of

¹ *Al-tağalliyāt*, p 432 ; *Esperienze mistiche* III, 241.



Islam' (*ḥuḡḡat al-islām*) in many issues. Thus, he has become and has been accepted as the undisputed master of Sunni Sufism.

5. Love in Philosophical Sufism: VI/XII-VII/XIII c.: Ibn al-'Arabī.

In spite of all perplexities and oppositions on the part of the dominant Sunni thought, the Sufi movement continued its route towards new and wider horizons. By that time, in fact, many new and different currents of thought had entered the Islamic world, especially after the translation of the great Greek philosophers into Arabic, during the first period of the Abbasid caliphate. Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Hermetic, and other oriental (Iranian) religious trends had spread throughout the Islamic world, producing some of the finest Muslim thinkers, such as al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), Ibn Sinā (d. 428/1037).

Such intellectual movements could not possible evolve without some influence on Sufism too. So, under the sway of different trends of thought a new type of Sufism came to light, known, because of its theoretical dimensions, as 'philosophical Sufism'. In such currents of thinking, one can notice a general orientation towards a sort of 'monistic vision of existence', known in Arabic as *waḥdat al-wuḡūd*, translated also as 'monism of existence or being'. Being or Existence is seen as one in its Essence; while appearing in a multitude of manifestations that constitute what is called 'the created world' (*kawn - ḥalq*). Such vision, expressed in several ways and through many names, is built upon a basic pattern: All is One, only God is the True-Real (*ḥaqq*), while the world (*ḥalq*) or the created universe (*kawn*) must be considered just manifestations of that Real. According to such vision, the divine Essence, while remaining in itself forever absolutely unknowable and unreachable, unfolds and manifests itself in an infinite number and variety of shapes and forms that are seen as the different levels of being. Actually, such manifestations do not have a true being-subsistence (*wuḡūd*) by and in themselves, but they only exist in and through the absolute Reality or Existence (*al-wuḡūd al-ḥaqq*). Between the two there is no ontological difference, but only a difference of consideration (*i'tibār*) or point of view. In short, Being must be seen as the All-One (the Neoplatonic *en kai pan*), i.e., One and Multiple in the same time. In such vision, the human being also acquires new dimensions. The human being is thought of as the microcosm, the mirror of all Divine attributes, the sum of all cosmic qualities and the synthesis of all Divine manifestations. Such sort of Sufi speculation reached its highest



expression in the idea of the “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), that has become the central point of many Sufi reflections and researches up to the present day. In such new epistemological horizon the concept of love also acquired new dimensions and expressions.¹

The most outstanding representative of such philosophical Sufism is undoubtedly the Andalusian (from *Andalus*, the Arab Spain) Sufi master, Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), called for the profundity and breadth of his synthesis ‘the Greatest Sufi Master’ (*al-šayḥ al-akbar*).² In his huge literary output Ibn al-‘Arabī tried to give the fullest and most accurate description of the world of Divine manifestations at all levels, ontological, cosmological and anthropological. In the end, aware of the extension and comprehensiveness of his synthesis, he did not recoil from proclaiming himself as ‘the Seal of Saints’ (*ḥātam al-awliyā’*), the highest degree in Islamic Sufi-Gnosticism (*‘irfān*).

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Sufi vision is based on a unitarian vision of Being. In it, Creator (*ḥaqq*) and creature (*ḥalq*) should not be considered different beings or degrees of being, as it is said in some philosophies, such as Neoplatonism. On

¹ For an overview of the idea of ‘Perfect Man’ (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in Islamic mysticism see Giuseppe Scattolin, "Realization of ‘Self’ (*Anā*) in Islamic Mysticism: The Mystical Experience of ‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ", in *Mélanges de l’Université de St. Joseph*, Dar El-Machreq (Beyrouth, Liban), Tome IV (1995-1996) 1999, 119-148.

² Muhyī al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-‘Arabī al-Ḥātīmī al-Ṭā’ī al-Andalusī, usually known as Ibn ‘Arabī, but we prefer the original form of its. i.e. Ibn al-‘Arabī), was born in Murcia (Spain, the Arabic *Andalus*) in 560/1165. In 598/1201 he travelled to the East, accomplishing his pilgrimage to Mekka, where he received his Mekkan Revelations, settling at last in Damascus, where he died in 638/1240. Ibn al-‘Arabī, called ‘the Greatest Sufi Master’ (*al-šayḥ al-akbar*), is no doubt one of the highest expressions of the Islamic Sufi thought, in which many different philosophical and religious currents were merged together. He expressed his Sufi view in a vast literary production between prose and poetry (around three hundred works or more; he himself mentions 289 works), that have become in time a basic reference for Sufis, inside and outside Islam. Among them are: *The Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*), considered the *summa magna* of his Sufism; *The Pearls of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*), a treatise on prophetology and a summary of his Sufi vision; *The Interpreter of Desires* (*Tarḡumān al-ašwāq*), a collection of love lyrics with deep symbolic meaning. For further information on his life, see Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī ou la quête du Soufre Rouge*, Gallimard, Paris 1989. For some basic studies on his thought see Abū ‘Alā ‘Afīfī, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī*, Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge, 1936; William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, 1989; Id., *The Self-Disclosure of God. Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, 1998.



the contrary, Creator (*ḥaqq*) and creature (*ḥalq*) must be considered aspects (*wuḡūh*) of the same Reality, which is always and in the same time one and multiple. The link between these two basic aspects of Reality is indicated in a famous hadīth that plays a central role in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s speculation, called ‘hadīth *kuntu*’: “I was a hidden treasure (*kuntu kanzan mahfiyyan... كنت كنزاً مخفياً*).¹ The Divine Essence is indicated as the ‘hidden treasure’, unknown in its transcendence. However it wanted (*aḥabba*) to be known, and for this reason it created the universe (*ḥalq*) and became manifested through it.

In such vision, also love (*ḥubb*) acquires new cosmic and ontological dimensions. Love is seen in it as the inner mover-movement of the Real (*ḥaqq*) towards its own manifestations (*taḡalliyāt-maẓāhir*), which constitute the whole created universe (*ḥalq-kawn*). Thus, *ḥubb* is the first and the ultimate cause of the existence of the universe, as Ibn ‘Arabī explicitly proclaims:

“The movement (*ḥaraka*) which is the existence of the world was a movement of love (*ḥubb*)... Were not for this love the world would have not appeared in its essence; thus, its movement from nothing (*‘adam*) to existence (*wuḡūd*) was the movement of love of the Creator (*mūḡid*) towards it (the world)... So, it is proved that the movement was out of love, and there is no movement in the universe except in relation to love (*ḥubbiyyatan*)...”²

(فكانت الحركة التي هي وجود العالم حركة حب..... فلولا هذه المحبة ما ظهر العالم،
فحركته من العدم إلى الوجود حركة حب الموجد لذلك... فثبت أن الحركة كانت للحب؛
فما تمَّ حركة في الكون إلا وهي حبيّة).

Continuing, Ibn al-‘Arabī declares that: “...love is the principle (*aṣl*) of all existent beings...”³,

¹ The hadīth says: “I was a hidden (unknown) treasure, and I loved (*aḥbabtu*) to be known (*u‘raf*), so I created the world, and through it they (creatures) knew me”.

(كنت كنزاً مخفياً فأحببت أن أعرف فخلقت الخلق فيه عرفوني)....

This hadīth, though not found in the official collections, has become very important for Sufis and is often quoted in their writings with some variants. We translated it from *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, edited by Abū ‘Alā ‘Afīfī, Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, Beirut, 1980, 203-204.

² *Fuṣūṣ* (‘Afīfī), 203-204.

³ *Fuṣūṣ* (‘Afīfī), 214.



(المحبة التي هي أصل الموجودات)

therefore, he can affirm that God is adored and loved in all forms of love and in all its manifestations, the greatest of these forms being love-passion (*hawā*) itself:

I swear for the reality of love (*hawā*) that love (*hawā*) is the cause of love (*hawā*):

without love (*hawā*) in the heart, love (*hawā*) would not be adored.¹

وحيق الهوى إن الهوى سبب الهوى ولولا الهوى في القلب ما عُبدَ الهوى

Such movement of love shows to be in the end love of the Real towards itself, as Abū 'Alā' 'Afīfī comments:

"Before any form of modalization, the One, in His supreme 'isolation' and simplicity, loved Himself for and in Himself, and loved to be known and to be manifested. This was the cause of creation. In loving Himself, the One loved all the *a'yān* [determinations] of things latent in His Essence, and hence they are impregnated with the love they now manifest in different ways....It is the love of the Whole as a Whole (as an Essence) and as a 'part' (as a particular mode of the Essence)...

Nothing is loved except God, just as nothing is worshipped except Him... [W]hen we say that we love God or anything, we mean that God loves Himself in us or in any other form... Through Love the Whole is bound together and through it the object of creation is realized".²

Such love is, of course, universal and cosmic, directed towards all the manifestations of the Real. In such vision there is no clear boundary between the opposites: good and evil, positive and negative, are all seen as manifestations of the Divine Names, and these of the same Essence. The gnostic (*'ārīf*) is one who knows the Real and, therefore, he is not bound to one aspect without the others, on the contrary, he accepts all aspects of the manifestations of the Real. At this level, one can understand what Ibn al-'Arabī, as well as other Sufis, mean when they talk about the 'unity of religions' (*waḥdat al-adyān*). In such a view,

¹ *Fuṣūṣ* ('Afīfī), 194; and 'Afīfī's commentary, 387-388.

² 'Afīfī, *The Mystical Philosophy*, 171-173. 'Afīfī compares Ibn al-'Arabī's Sufi vision with that of Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677), finding many interesting parallels between them.



religions are all valid because they all are different manifestations of the same, one Reality. Reality is surely one, but multiple in its manifestations, consequently religions are basically all one in the one Reality. The true 'arif (gnostic) is one who recognizes the one Reality in the multitude of its manifestations. On such basis, Ibn al-'Arabī can proclaim his universal love for all religions in some celebrated verses, very often quoted in context of religious pluralism:¹

"Now my heart is capable of all forms:
it is the cloister of monks, and the temple of idols,

the pasture of gazelles, and the pilgrim's Ka'ba,
the tables of the Torah, and the text of the Korân.

My religion is Love, wherever its camels turn:
Love is my religion and my faith".

لقد صارَ قلبي قابلاً كلَّ صورةٍ فمَرَعَى لَغْزَلَانٍ وَوَيْدِيْرَ لُرُهْبَانِ
وَبَيْتَ لَأُوْثَانٍ وَكَعْبَةَ طَائِفٍ، وَأَلْوَاخَ تَوْرَاةٍ وَمُصْحَفَ قُرْآنِ
أَدِيْنُ بَدِيْنِ الْحُبِّ أَنْي تَوَجَّهْتُ رَكَائِبُهُ فَالْحُبُّ دِيْنِي وَإِيْمَانِي

This is the utmost degree of love in Ibn al-'Arabī's Sufi vision. Love is the very essence of religion and of all religions, and such love is necessarily universal, open to all. In fact, the gnostic in Ibn al-'Arabī's vision, is the one who sees in everything the flow of the Divine manifestations, in their multiplicity and variety, from the same absolute Essence, especially in religions. In them all, the gnostic contemplates the only one Reality. In such vision, Sufi love necessarily acquires new unthought-of dimensions, becoming a cosmic, universal love embracing all beings as manifestations of the same Divine Essence.

Such monistic and universalistic Sufi vision has been the source of inspiration for many Sufi poets. Some of them are well also known in the West,

¹ Ibn al-'Arabī, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, ed. by Reynold A. Nicholson, London, Royal Society, 1911, no. 11, (vv. 13-15), 19; Id., Dār Sadr, Beirut, 1966, 43-44.



such as the Egyptian ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid (d. 632/1235) and the Persian Ġalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the Turkish Yunes Emre (d. 721/1321), and many others. They all have drawn their inspiration from such monistic and universal Sufism, producing many works of great artistic value. Sufism, in fact, has always been one of the main sources of Islamic art in all fields, especially literature, music, architecture. In literature, the language of love has been extensively used and developed by Sufis, who brought it to its highest and deepest levels, and Sufi love literature is surely one of the richest and finest at world level. In these Sufi authors, we come in touch with some of the highest expressions of human creative artistic power, at its most universal significance.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Sufi vision had a large influence on later Sufism up to our days, to such an extent that there is a widespread tendency, or say fashion, of considering Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Sufism as the synthesis of all Sufism, if not the quintessence of all mysticisms in all religions. Such an idea can be easily recognized in the writings of many modern contemporary Sufi writers, such as Sayyed Hossein Nasr,¹ as well as many contemporary Western scholars, such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, William Chittick, Michel Chodkiewicz, who have embraced, more or less openly, Sufism as their way of life and study.

One should note, however, that such a pretension is quite disputable and linked to personal reasons. Actually, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Sufism could be described, in our view, as a ‘Sufism of mediations’. In fact, it focuses on the contemplation and assimilation of the Divine manifestations into which the Sufi must completely lose himself. But, the Divine Essence in itself remains forever totally transcending the world of its manifestations, enshrouded, as it were, in the unreachable mystery of its non-knowledge and non-manifestation. In this kind of Sufism, there is no experience of the burning encounter with the Divine ‘Thou’, a ‘Thou’ that always transcends all his manifestations, never identifying Himself with them or being conditioned by them. Therefore, in the Akbarian Sufism the Sufi never comes to the blazing ‘face to face’ encounter with his Lord, as it happens in the so-called ‘ecstatic Sufism’, in Sufis such as al-Ḥallāğ, al-Niffarī and others. Here, God appears as the absolute ‘Thou’ with whom the Sufi has the transforming ‘face to face’ encounter. Such an encounter is well-described by the Iraqi Sufi ‘Abd al-Ġabbār al-Niffarī (d. 354/965 or 366/976), who criticizes the

¹ See Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essyas*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1972.



gnostic Sufism of the veil (*hiğāb*), that keeps the Sufi always far from the encounter and vision of the Divine 'Thou':

"And he said to me: 'I look at you and I love that you look at Me'. Every act of manifesting [= creating] veils you from me: your soul is a veil (*hiğāb*), your science is a veil, your gnosis is a veil, your names are a veil, even My self-revelation to you is a veil. Expel, therefore, everything from your heart, and expel from your heart the science of all things and the remembrance of all things. And every time I manifest to your heart something manifested [in creation], reject it towards the beginning of its manifestation: clear your heart for Me so that you can look at Me without making anything prevail on Me". (*Mawāqif* 14, 14).¹

وقال لي: أنا ناظرك وأحب أن تنظر إليّ والإبداء كله يحجبك عني، نفسك حجابك وعلمك حجابك ومعرفتك حجابك وأسمائك حجابك وتعزفي إليك حجابك فأخرج من قلبك كل شيء وأخرج من قلبك العلم بكل شيء وذكر كل شيء وكلما أبديت لقلبك باديا فألقه إلى بدوه وفرغ قلبك لي لتتنظر إليّ ولا تغلب عليّ [المواقف/ موقف الأمر]

Only such direct vision (*ru'ya*) of God, according to al-Niffarī, must be the final purpose and last goal of true Sufism. Love in this kind of Sufism is a personal encounter with the Divine 'Thou', and not with the cosmic display of the 'Divine manifestations'. On such a basis, one can contrast the Sufism of 'gnostic knowledge' (*ma'rifa*), on one side, with the 'Sufism of personal love' (*hubb*) on the other. The first is a sort of Islamic Gnosticism, where the language of knowledge is prevalent, and the esoteric knowledge (*ma'rifa*) united with cosmic love (*hubb*) seems to be the highest point of the spiritual journey. Ibn al-'Arabī is considered to be the most outstanding representative of such gnostic Sufism, that has become very common among Sufis following his path. The other type of Sufism is the Sufism of personal love, where the center of Sufi experience is the personal encounter with God, perceived as the absolute 'Thou' coming in direct encounter with the Sufi. Here, the language of love, as a

¹ Arthur John Arberry (ed.), *The Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt of Muḥammad Ibn 'Abdi 'l-Jabbār al-Niffarī* (Engl.) - *Kitāb al-Mawāqif wa-Kitāb al-Muḥāṭabāt* (Arab.), edited and translated by Arthur John Arberry, Memoria E.J.W.Gibb, New Series IX, Cambridge University Press, 1935, (Arab.) p. 31.



personal encounter and ecstasy in the Beloved, is prevalent. Both types of Sufism are found in Islam, as well as in other mysticisms. Each Sufi may prefer one or the other, or blend them together. Only a careful analysis of Sufi experience can show whether the first or the second type of Sufism is prevalent in a certain author.

Finally, one must point out that Ibn al-'Arabī's Sufi doctrine has been widely adopted, often in an esoteric way, in Sufi brotherhoods, orders or 'ways' (*ṭuruq sūfiyya*), which have become up to our days the most visible manifestations of Sufism in Islam.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present paper on the language of love in Sufism is to give a general overview of the history of such important topic in Sufism. In fact, it was through a long process of spiritual experience that the full extent of Sufi love has been explored, developed, and expressed. These texts used in this paper come from different, mostly unrelated authors in different times and places. All of them, however, have tried to express some aspects of the Sufi experience, particularly of Sufi love.

In this way, the reader should be able to see what kind of Sufi love a particular author has expressed, whether he adds some particular aspects to it, and to what extent he differs from others. All this is part of the hermeneutics of Sufi texts, which is in any way always not an easy one.

In the end, however, one should point out that only a personal Sufi taste will give the reader the true key for understanding and assimilating the ultimate intent of Sufi expressions, which can be understood mainly through an inner disclosure, and not through a pure rational explanation. Sufi experience, in fact, remains in the end a holy secret between the Sufi and God.

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