Love in the History of Sufism
Experience and Language

Submitted by

Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin
Professor of Islamic Mysticism at (PISAI)
Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Rome, Italy.

Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar
Lecturer of Islamic Philosophy and Islamic mysticism,
Faculty of Arts, Port Said University.
Visiting Researcher, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University,
Bratislava, Slovakia.

DOI: 10.21608/jfpsu.2020.44050.1017
Love in the History of Sufism
Experience and Language

Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin
Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar

I knew my Lord through my Lord,
without my Lord never would I have known my Lord
 IDirect l-Nūn al-Miṣri (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-Ḥallāq
- Love in Sunni Sufism: al-Gazālī.
- Conclusion.

**key words:** Love, Sufism, Sunni Sufism, Philosophical Sufism, mysticism.

الحب في التصوف الإسلامي
بين الخبرة واللغة

أ.د. جوزيبي سكاتولين
د. أحمد حسن أنور

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

الخلاص باللغة العربية:

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

---

1. أستاذ التصوف الإسلامي المعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية، روما، إيطاليا.
2. عضو مراسل مجمع اللغة العربية بالقاهرة، جمهورية مصر العربية.
3. مدرس الفلسفة الإسلامية والتصوف، بكلية الآداب، جامعة بورسعيد.

Giuseppe Scattolin (والباحث المصري د. أحمد حسن أنور)، وتأتي هذا البحث تحديدا كتطوّر لعمل بحثي آخر مشترك بينا نشر في: المعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية، روما، إيطاليا. - عام 2009م تحت عنوان: المحبة في تاريخ التصوف عند صحافاته (280) صفحة، وقد ساهم أحمد حسن أنور، بالاشتغال على (L’amour Dans L’histoire Du Sufisme) النص العربي كاملا في الكتاب المشار إليه سلفا، في حين اشتكبني جوزيبي سكاتولين على النص الفرنسي كاملا. فأردنا تطوير العمل شيئا فشيئا وإخراجه في لغة مشتركة تكون متاحة للقراءة الفارغة العربي والغربي معا، فأخرجناها في هذا الشكل باللغة الإنجليزية.

الجدير بالذكر أن المؤلفين يعملان معا على دراسة التصوف الإسلامي منذ عام 2007م، ونشروا عدة أعمال مشتركة منها:

- التجلبات الروحية في الإسلام (الطبعة الأولى: الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، 2008م). (الطبعة الثانية: مكتبة الأهرام، القاهرة، مصر، كما ترجم هذا الكتاب إلى اللغة الإيطالية.
- الأبعاد الصوفية عند عبد الملك الخركوش (دراسة ونصوص)، دار مصر المتحفية، 2009م، القاهرة، مصر.
- المحبة في تاريخ التصوف (باللغة العربية والفرنسية)، المعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية، روما، إيطاليا، 2009م...... علامة على اشتراكهما معا في عدة ورش عمل دولية بـ (مصر، إيطاليا، المجار، سلوفاكيا).
اللغة العربية من ناحية، ثم خضع لمراحل التطورات الدينية وروحية وفلاسفية عميقة من ناحية أخرى. ولقد أثرت الآيات القرآنية والأحاديث النبوية على تشكيل لغة الحب (لغة الخبرة الروحية) على صعوبة الإسلام في مرحلة مبكرة (في القرن الأول والثاني الهجريين). كما أن مفردات اللغة العربية الغزيرة والفردة والمتميزة قد ساعدت في التصوف على التعبير عن أدق خلوات المشاعر الإنسانية المرتبطة بالحب عامة، والحب الإلهي خاصة، فالجذر (ح- ب- ب) ب المختلف مشتقته له مكانة مركزية في اللغة العربية عامة، وفي التصوف الإسلامي خاصة.

ومن هذا المنطلق تم بيلاد 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، تتعبر عن أصول التجربة الروحية في الإسلام. وتطور لغة الحب (لغة الخبرة الروحية) أصبحت هذه (اللغة) (لغة الخبرة الروحية) المكون الرئيسي - بل والهدف أيضاً - لأي كتاب في التصوف الإسلامي. ابتداء من القرن الثالث الهجري، مما يجعل مجال هذا البحث واسع للغاية، لذلك نحن الباحث في هذا البحث تصلب وضوء على بعض السمات الأساسية فقط، في محاولة رسم مخطط عرض للسياق التاريخي الذي قدمه الصوفية في هذا المجال، من خلال العناصر التالية:

- مقدمة.
- الحب في حركة الزهرة الأولى (القرنين الأول والثاني الهجريين/ السابع والثامن الميلاديين).
- بدايات الحب الخاص (القرن الثاني الهجري/ القرن الثامن الميلادي): رابطة العدوية.
- نحو تصفح الاتحاد: الحلا.
- 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 (*Ḥ 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 (*Ḥ 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 (*šahawāt*) 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)


² DAFA III, 1993a.
you blind and deaf". 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.

It is precisely the derivatives of the root (Ḥ 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-hayāt al-duniyā), 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 “Exégèse coranique et langage mystique” (Beyrouth, 1970). 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 hadith in A. J. Wensinck, Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1936-1969: I, 409a (al-Dārimi, adab 116).
2 DAFA III, 1996a-b.
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”. 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, Ḍū 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*)'”.

(اللهي أدعوك في الملل كما تدعى الأرباب، وأدعوك في الخلا كما تدعى الأحباب)

The first invocation (*rabh*) comes in accordance with the Koranic style-language: God is the name of public invocation! The second invocation (*habīb*) 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 (*Ḥ B B*) in the Koran occur in a quite limited frequency (only 83 times), if compared with other roots, such as (*R Ḥ M*), (*M N*) (*B D*), which have a much higher frequency.

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


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

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

After the Koran one has to look for the semantic extension of the language of love in the hadîth 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 hadîth literature there is a clear semantic development of love language, compared with that of the Koran.

In hadîth 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 hadîths also by the

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 hadîths, such as: "If someone loves to meet God, God will love (ahabba) to meet him (liqā')"; "He loves (yuḥibbu) God and his Messenger, therefore God and his Messenger love him (yuḥibbu-hu)..."; and so: "When God loves (ahabba) somebody... the people of heaven will love (fa-yuḥibbu-hu) him too"; "...God will love him (ahabba-hu) and the people of heaven will love him too (ahabba-hu)"; "... if someone loves (ahabba-hum) them, God will love him (ahabba-hu)"; "... if someone loves me (ahabba-nī), let people love him too (fa-l-yuḥibba-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 yuḥibbu-hu)...".  

In some hadîths 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 hadîths such as: "So, if someone loves them, it is through my love (bi-ḥubb-i) 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)”. 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". Here one can say that love reaches its climax in the hadîth 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-Tirmiṭī, ḍihād 26).
2 Concordance I, 406a (al-Buḫārī, ḍibā‘ 41); I, 406b (Ibn Ḥanbal 3, 218); ibid. (al-Buḫārī, manāqib al-ansār 4); ibid. (Ibn Ḥanbal 5, 366); I, 407b (Muslim, faḍā‘īl al-ṣaḥāba 57-59).
3 Concordance I, 406b (al-Tirmiṭī, manāqib 58); I 408a (Ibn Ḥanbal 3, 393).
4 Concordance I, 408a (al-Tirmiṭī, da‘awāt 30); ibid. (al-Buḫārī, 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 hadîths. Thus, the hadîth 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 hadîths, 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 hadîth 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 hadîth material.

It is also important to underline the role these hadîths played in the formation of later Sufi language and experience. Such hadîths 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 hadîth 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 hadîths, in fact, will be later on reported in the classical manuals of Sufism, such as the Risāla fī ‘īlm al-taṣawwuf of Abû al-Qāsim al-Qušayrī (d. 465/1072), Iḥyā’ ulūm al-dīn of Abû Ḥāmid al-Ḡazâlī (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 hadîth 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- Başrī (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 (ḫawf) 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-ṭaḡalliyāt, 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-ṭaḡalliyāt, 51-77.
his vocabulary. Nonetheless, al-Hasan al-Basrī is credited as the transmitter of a famous hadîth on the reciprocal love ('išq) between God and his servant.\(^1\) It is interesting to note that here the non-Koranic term (but occurring in hadîth) 'išq is used, instead of the Koranic ḥubb-maḥabba. Was it to avoid any similarity with Christian vocabulary, as its reporter 'Abd al-Wâhid b. Zayd (d. 177/793) used to say? In this hadîth it is said that the remembrance (dîkr) of God is the source of mutual love ('išq) between God and his servant, and this love leads to the lifting of veil (kašf al-ḥiḡāb) between them so that the servant might see (ruʿya) his Lord at his will. This connection between remembrance (dîkr) of God, love ('išq-ḥubb), lifting of the veils (kašf al-ḥiḡāb/ḥuḡub), and vision (ruʿya) will become quite common in Sufi literature.

2. The Beginning of the Path of Pure Love (II/VIII c.): Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya\(^2\)

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 Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (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. Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya has been called in Sufi tradition (Farîdudîn Ṭâṭâr, 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?", Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya 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-taḡalliyāʿ*, 78-85.
\(^3\) *Al-taḡalliyāʿ*, p. 81; *Esperienze mistiche* I, p. 55.
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 (tawḥīd al-ḥubb): "There is no Beloved (mahbūb) 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 (ḥawā),
The other is the one only You deserve.

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

The love only You deserve
Occurs when you lift (kašf) the veils (huğub)
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.

¹ Al-tağalliyāt, 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 (hubb)-passion (hawā), lift (kašf) the veils (hiğāb/ḫuğub), vision (ruʿya). The same terms, in the same sequence appear in the hadīth of love (išq) transmitted by al-Hasan al-Baṣrī, as mentioned above.

With Rābiʿa 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). He too developed a language of love based on the concepts of friendship (ḫulla), intimate knowledge (maʾrifa), love (mahabbā); recollection of God’s name (dikr), silence (ṣamt), and at the end in the vision (ruʿya) 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".

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

1. the literal meaning or expression ('ibāra), proper to the common believers (al-ʾawāmm);
2. the inner meaning or allusion (išāra), proper to the special people (al-ḥawāss);
3. the subtle meanings (laṭāʾif), proper to the friends-saints of God (al-awliyāʾ);
4. the deepest divine realities (ḥaqāʾiq), proper to the prophets (al-anbiyāʾ).

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

1. the literal meaning or expression ('ibāra), proper to the common believers (al-ʾawāmm);
2. the inner meaning or allusion (išāra), proper to the special people (al-ḥawāss);
3. the subtle meanings (laṭāʾif), proper to the friends-saints of God (al-awliyāʾ);
4. the deepest divine realities (ḥaqāʾiq), proper to the prophets (al-anbiyāʾ).

كتاب الله على أربعة أشياء: العبارة والإشارة واللطائف والحقائق
فالعبارة للعوام، والإشارة للخواص، واللطائف للأولى، والحقائق للأنبياء

1 Al-taḡalliyāt, 72-77; Esperienze mistiche I, 50-53.
2 Massion, Essai, 256-258; Esperienze mistiche I, 53.
3 Nwyia, Exégèse, p. 156-207.
Ga’far al-Ṣādiq 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)").

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-Ḥallāq.

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-Ḥallāq’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’ā 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-Muḥāṣibī (d. 243/857) and Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859), love becomes a major topic. Al-Muḥāṣibī, though much concerned with the exercise of the ‘examination of conscience’ (*muḥāṣaba*), has left a very interesting ‘chapter on love’, in which some of the basic qualities and consequences of love are described. Dū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī has developed a fine analysis and very colourful language about love, its stages and moods. But, the one who first introduced a new dimension in the topic of love was undoubtedly the ‘master of Sufi people’ (*šayḥ al-ṭā’īfa*) and the ‘master of unity’ (*tawḥīd*), Abū al-Qāsim al-Ǧunayd (d. 298/910). He is the first

---

2 *Al-tağalliyät*, 100-201; *Esperienze mistiche* I, 61-62.
5 Abū al-Qāsim al-Ǧunayd, a Sufi of Baghdad, called ‘the Master of the (Sufi) Group’ (*šayḥ al-ṭā’īfa*), 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

Al-Ḥunayd developed also another central topic of Sufism, that of ‘annihilation’ (fanā’) of the servant (‘abd) 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 (fā’il) but only the ‘acted upon’ (mafʿūl); God is the unique, absolute agent (fāʾil). Since al-Ḥunayd the two terms, love (ḥubb-maḥabba) and annihilation (fanā’), 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-Ḥunayd’s renowned disciple, the Sufi martyr, al-Ḥallāġ.

Al-Husayn b. Mansūr al-Ḥallāġ (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-Ḥallāġ puts love (ḥubb-maḥabba) at the center of the

² Al-Ḥusayn b. Mansūr al-Ḥallāġ 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-Ḥunayd), 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-Ḥallāġ 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-Ḥallāj, 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-taḡalliyāt, 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 (‘išq); and this attribute (ṣija) 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-Hallāq 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-Ḥallāq 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-Hallāq’s expression. Al-Ḥallāq has been accused of upholding the idea of ‘monism’ (in Arabic waḥdat al-wuḡūd), 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-Ḥallāq actually an upholder of true monism? Many scholars now doubt such a traditional understanding of him. Others have compared Ḥallāq’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-Ḥallāq by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī (d. 422/1030), Kitāb aṭf al-alif al-ma’lūf al-lām al-ma’tūf, ed. by Jean-Claude Vadet, IFAO, Cairo, 1962, 24-29; see Al-taḡaṭliyāt, 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-Daylamī, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1980, 65-66. L. Massignon remarks that al-Daylamī uses both terms, desire (‘išq) and love (maḥabba), while al-Ḥallāq preferred to talk of ‘desire’ (‘išq), but of the ‘essential desire’ (‘išq dāti) 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 Hallāqian 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 (ṣaṭāḥāt). Such psychological explanations have been given by many Sunni Sufis, like al-Ǧazālī. 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-ǧam’), where – after the transformation of his șifāt – he finds himself ‘transubstantiated’ in Divine essence – without confusion or destruction – acquiring in this way his definitive, supreme Anā”.

Such metamorphosis 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:

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.

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’ilīyya), 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-Ǧunayd, in his reflection upon the highest degree of tawḥīd, as shown above. True tawḥīd

---

2 Al-taḡalliyāṭ, p. 185; Esperienze mistiche I, p. 127.
requires that the servant’s (‘abd) action be completely overwhelmed by God’s power (called by al-Ǧunayd ǧalaba), and the servant become in His hands like a shadow (šabah) 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-Ǧunayd and al-Ḥallāġ, a new dimension: "There is no agent (fā’il) but the God (Allāh)." 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). 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-taġalliyāt, p. 194.
2 Al-taģalliyāt, 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.

What al-Hallāq 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 tawḥīd 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.

Thus, deepening the position of his master al-Ǧunayd, al-Hallāq 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-Ǧunayd’s remark about tawḥīd: "The further human minds venture out towards the extreme limits of tawḥīd, the further they venture out into bewilderment."²

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

This can be applied to al-Ḥallāq’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-taḡalliyyāt, 194.  
² Al-taḡalliyyāt, 168; Esperienze mystiche II, 16; reported in Al-risālat al-qušayriyya, op. cit., vol. 2, 853.
Here, one can see that the question of *tawḥīd* remains at the very heart of Islamic faith and Sufi experience. In fact, in Sufi experience the true *tawḥīd* implies a transforming presence of God in the heart of the human being, who must be taken up into the true *tawḥīd*, which is the eternal Self-proclamation God Himself makes of His Unity. Since al-Ğunayd and al-Ḥallāġ, the quest for the ‘true *tawḥīd* has become a basic issue for Sufis. A later strict Hanbalite Sufi, such as ʿAbd 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-sāʾirīn*), 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 (*tawḥīd*).

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

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-ṭaḡalliyāt, p. 386; Esperienze mistiche II, p. 16.
questions in Sufism. Al-Ḥallāg has clearly indicated the ‘royal path of love’
(maṣḥab 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”.

Al-Ḥallāg is recognized as one of the major representatives of what is called
‘ecstatic Sufism’. The Sufi, 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 Sufi’s expressions sound strange,
shocking and even blasphemous to the ordinary believer. But, for the Sufi, they
are the only possible utterances in human language of what he is now
experiencing. These are the so called ‘theopathic locutions’ (ṣaṭṭahāt), because
the speaker in them is not the Sufi, but God. These ṣaṭṭahāt are one of the most
astonishing aspects of Sufi 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 (fuqāḥ-‘ulamā’), who could not
accept any idea of real love and unity between a human being and God.


After al-Ḥallāg’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 Sufi 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 Sufi experience,
already well developed in Islam, and the Islamic law (ṣarī‘a), already well
established and elaborated in Islamic society. It was, in fact, during the III/IX
century that the Islamic ṣarī‘a reached its final codification in the four schools
of law universally recognized in Islam: the ḥanafīyya, the mālikīyya, 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-ṣūfīyya (The Generations of Sufis), one of the first biographical books of Sufis.
Abū Nu’aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038), author of Hilyat al-awliyā’ (The Ornament of the Friends-Saints of God), a very large compendium of Sufi biographies in 10 volumes.
ʿAbdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), author of Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfīyya (The Generations of Sufis) (one of the first Sufi composition in Persian).
Farīduddīn al-ʿAṭṭār (d. ca. 587/1190, and not 627/1229 as usually reported), author of Taḏkirat al-awliyā’ (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’ fi l-taṣawwuf (The Book of Flashes on Sufism), a first and basic reference for Sufi science and terminology.
Abū Bakr al-Kalābāḏī (d. 380/990 or 384/994), author of Kitāb al-ta’arruf limadhab ahl al-taṣawwuf (The Book of Knowledge of Sufis), a short and popular manual of Sufism.
Abū Ṭālib al-Makki (d. 386/996), author of Qūṭ al-qulūb (The Nourishment of the Hearts), a large popular Sufi manual.
ʿAbd al-Mālik al-Ḥarkūšī (d. 407/1016), author of Taḥdīb 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 fi ’ilm al-taṣawwuf (The Treatise on the Science of Sufism), usually known as Al-risāla al-qaṣayriyya (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-maḥḡūb li-ARBĀḥ al-qulūb (The Unveiling of the Veiled for the People of Hearts), the first treatise on Sufism in Persian.
ʿAbdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), author of Kitāb manāzil al-sāʾirīn (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 (ṣuyūḥ), 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-Ḡazālī, love is the highest state in Sufi experience.

Among them all, the great Ash’arite theologian, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḡazālī (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’ (ḥuǧǧat al-islām). Al-Ḡazālī 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-munqiḏ min al-ḍalāl), al-Ḡazālī describes his conversion to Sufism, expressing his strong criticism of both philosophical and theological sciences. From such a premise, one can understand why al-Ḡazālī in his summa of Islamic Sunnism, his famous Revivification of Religious Sciences (Iḥiyāʾ ’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. In this chapter,

1 Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ḡazālī 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 Nizāmiyya 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-Ḡazālī left a great number of works, among them his famous theological summa, Iḥiyāʾ ’ulum al-dīn (The Revivification of Religious Sciences); the personal account of his conversion Al-Munqiḏ 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-Gazâlî 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 forth 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-Gazâlî 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’ (ḥalīfat Allāh); ‘image of God’ (ṣūrat Allāh), and the being into which the ‘Spirit of God’ (rūḥ Allāh) has been breathed. At this point, however, al-Gazâlî strongly condemns what he calls the exaggerations of many Sufi’s sayings, like those of al-Bistāmī, al-Ḥallāǧ. In his mind, those Sufis have gone too far in speaking of real union (waḥda) with God, or of the inhabitation (hulūl) of God in the human being, and other similar expressions. Al-Gazâlî 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-Gazâlî 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’.

Thus, the servant’s closeness (qurb) to God only means in al-Ḡazālī’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-asma’ al-ḥusnā). With this purpose, al-Ḡazālī 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 (waḡd) 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-Ḡazālī 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-Ḡazālī 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-Ḡazālī 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-Ḡazālī has become over time the most accepted authority of Sunni doctrine and is constantly referred to as the ‘proof of

---

1 Al-taḡalliyāt, p 432 ; Esperienze mistiche III, 241.
Islam’ (ḥuǧǧat al-islām) in many issues. Thus, he has become and has been accepted as the undisputed master of Sunni Sufism.


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-wuǧūd, 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 (wuǧūd) by and in themselves, but they only exist in and through the absolute Reality or Existence (al-wuǧūd al-ḥaqq). Between the two there is no ontological difference, but only a difference of consideration (iʿtibār) 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, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), called for the profundity and breadth of his synthesis ‘the Greatest Sufi Master’ (al-ṣayḥ al-akbar).² In his huge literary output Ibn al-ʿArabī 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 (ʿirfān).

Ibn al-ʿArabī’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

---


² Muḥyī al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-ʿArabī al-Ḥātimī al-Ṭāʾī al-Andalusī, usually known as Ibn ʿArabī, but we prefer the original form of its, i.e. Ibn al-ʿArabī), 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-ʿArabī, called ‘the Greatest Sufi Master’ (al-ṣayḥ 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-hikam), a treatise on prophetology and a summary of his Sufi vision; The Interpreter of Desires (Tarḥumān al-ašwāq), a collection of love lyrics with deep symbolic meaning. For further information on his life, see Claude Addas, Ibn ʿArabī ou la quête du Soufre Rouge, Gallimard, Paris 1989. For some basic studies on his thought see Abū ʿAlā ʿAffā, The Mystical Philosophy of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge, 1936; William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, 1989; Id., The Self-Disclosure of God. Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Cosmology, State University of New York Press (SUNY), Albany, 1998.
the contrary, Creator (haqq) and creature (ḥalq) must be considered aspects (wuğūh) 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 كنزًا مخفًى).”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 (haqq) towards its own manifestations (tağalliyāt-mażāhir), 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 ʿArabī 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 (ʿadam) to existence (wuğūd) was the movement of love of the Creator (mūgid) 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

Continuing, Ibn al-ʿArabī 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 (uʿraf), so I created the world, and through it they (creatures) knew me”.

2 Fuṣūs (‘Afīfī), 203-204.

3 Fuṣūs (‘Afīfī), 214.
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.  

Such movement of love shows to be in the end love of the Real towards itself, as Abū ′Alāʾ ʿAfīfī 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...

When 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".  

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 (ʿārif) 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-ʿArabī, as well as other Sufis, mean when they talk about the ‘unity of religions’ (waḥdat al-adyān). In such a view,

1 Fuṣūṣ (ʿAfīfī), 194; and ʿAfīfī’s commentary, 387-388.

2 ʿAfīfī, The Mystical Philosophy, 171-173. ʿAfīfī compares Ibn al-ʿArabī’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 'ārif (gnostic) is one who recognizes the one Reality in the multitude of its manifestations. On such basis, Ibn al-ʿArabī 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 Kaʾba,
the tables of the Torah, and the text of the Korān.

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

This is the utmost degree of love in Ibn al-ʿArabī’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-ʿArabī’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,

such as the Egyptian ʿUmar Ibn al-Fārid (d. 632/1235) and the Persian Ḍalāl 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-ʿArabi’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-ʿArabi’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-ʿArabi’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 ʿThou’, 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-Ḥāllāḡ, al-Niffārī 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 ʿAbd al-Ḡabbār al-Niffārī (d. 354/965 or 366/976), who criticizes the

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 gnostics 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).”

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

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.

**References**


