

Love (*Mohabba*) in Sufism

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Abstract

In the following, I describe the Sufi Path (tariqa) as a dialectical process which transforms the person through love. I examine the belief system of Islamic mystics as a journey involving both creativity and passion. I do so by using a fresh approach, a perspective that has heretofore yet to be applied to the spiritual alchemy of the Sufis.

Keywords: *Sufism, love, lover, mohabba, path, tariqa.*

Each step or stage in the Sufi Path will be seen as a metaphor, a symbolic inclusion with what came before and an extension to what is yet to come. Such a perspective allows us to have a greater understanding of the logic of the *tariqa*, and thus a better appreciation of Sufi beliefs and the statements and commentary through which their transformation is described. The Sufis can be seen as developing and describing a syntagmatic chain of motivation, for each step in the journey can be seen as a part of a greater whole which propels them to seek yet another until the entirety is realized. Each stage is a metaphoric transformation which is linked to the next, and through the various transformations, the person draws ever closer to God, and is cumulatively transformed.

I. Love or *Mahabba*

This is to be effected through and for love (*mahabba*) (.g. Schimmel, 1975 130; Chittick 1983). Done for love, the entire Path is an expression of it. For the Sufi, one's yearning for God provides a means to be ultimately consumed with and by love (e.g., Harvey, 1996, 138). Since the Path as a whole is a transformation of love, it can be seen as a master trope which informs each stage in the journey, effecting each of the minor transformations and enabling its ultimate culmination.

The most dramatic example of a Sufi transformed by love is Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj whose striking,

ecstatic pronouncement “I am Reality” (*ana’l-haqq* in Arabic, Reality being one of the names of God) can be seen as a point to be interpreted and perhaps as the culmination of the Sufi way. His statement was of course considered blasphemous, and was in keeping with his preaching to the masses that God could be discovered within one’s own heart (Massignon, 1971, 100). Perhaps for such reasons, as well as perhaps implied political ones,¹ he was put to death by the authorities in 922 A.D. His death may also be instructive. Attar (d. between 1220-1230), the most famous hagiographer of the Sufis, records his death in the following way.²

When Hallaj was in prison he was asked: “What is love?” He answered: “You will see it today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.” And that day they cut off his hands and feet, the next day they put him on the gallows, and the third day they gave his ashes to the wind. (Schimmel, 1975 p63-64)

From each of his dismembered limbs came the cry *ana’l-haqq*, from each drop of his blood the word Allah was formed, and even his ashes did not fail to proclaim the Truth (Arberry 1966, 270-271).

It can be asked what enabled and motivated such passion, that it was said to continue even after death? Or to put it another way, what allowed for the person to be seen as so transformed, that every part of Hallaj’s body was seen as imbued with sanctity, if not divinity? The Sufi Path is intrinsically transformative and is permeated with and predicated upon love for God.³

To use a Sufi metaphor, this is to be accomplished by the cleansing of one’s heart. According to Hallaj the heart is enveloped by a series of veils (sg. *kashf*), obscure and incoherent sensations and images which prevent man from contemplating God and which coincide with or reside in the *nafs*, or lower self and base instincts. The purpose is to strip away each veil, as al Ghazzali (d.1111) writes, “to overcome appetites of the flesh and [dissolve] its evil dispositions and vile qualities, so that the heart may be cleared of all but God” (Arberry, 1950, 80).⁴

II. Station and State

To do this one proceeds through a series of stations (*maqamat*, singular *maqam*, and states *ahwal*, singular *hal*). The number

and order of stations and states varied from sheikh to sheikh, and often a particular master did not clearly delineate between them, or he disagreed with another sheikh as to whether a particular point in the path constituted a state or station (Schimmel, 100). But generally, the first stage was conversion or repentance (*tawba*), which means “to give up to this world and eventually to give up everything that distracts the heart from God, even to renounce the thought of renunciation” (Schimmel, 100). Clearly, this could lead to poverty (*faqr*), another early stage in the *tariqa*, for it also meant to give up any and all possessions. This could lead to putting complete trust in God (*tawakkul*), stemming from the realization that all things come from God. As Schimmel (*ibid.* 119) notes, complete trust in God “*tawakkul*” “means to realize *tauhid*” [the unity of God], another stage on the path, “for it would be *shirk khafi* ‘hidden associationism [i.e. polytheism] to rely upon. . . any created being.” The realization that one must completely rely on God involves another stage, patience (*sabr*), that one must accept whatever comes from God, and this elicits still another, gratitude (*shukr*), which as Schimmel (125) states is superior to patience because not only does one accept what comes from God but one is also thankful for it. The two states resolve themselves in contentment or satisfaction (*rida*).

Many other stages could be enumerated. For example, al-Ghazzali lists resolve (*niya*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), contemplation (*muraqaba*), self-examination (*muhasaba*) yearning (*shauq*) and intimacy (*uns*) (Arberry, 1950, 82) But it usually culminated with gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and love (*mahabba*).⁵

Junayd's (d. 910) statement on love is perhaps the clearest example of the preeminence given to it. His definition of what it means in Sufi thought marks it as the culmination of the Path: “Love is the annihilation of the lover in His attributes and the confirmation of the Beloved in His essence.” Or again: “it is that the qualities of the beloved enter in the place of the qualities of the lover” (Schimmel, 134). Hallaj (Harvey, 144) is also worth quoting here:

Love is that you remain standing
In front of your Beloved.

When you are deprived of all your attributes,
Then His attributes become your qualities.
Between me and You, there is only me.
Take away the me, so only You remain.
Then of course there is Rumi (Chittick, 215):
Love is that flame which when it blazes up, burns away
everything except the Beloved. . . .
There remains but God, the rest has gone. Bravo, oh great, idol-
burning Love!

Thus love can be seen as an overarching metaphor for the transformation between believer and God.⁶

Also, according to Rumi (Mathnawi 5:672), when this has occurred the goal of *fana* “annihilation in God” has been achieved. Or, according to al-Ghazzali, the “spiritual alchemy” or “alchemy of bliss” (*al-kimiya as-sadah*) has been completed (Burckhardt, 1959, 101). Hallaj’s image of this process was the moth drawn to the flame, circling ever nearer, until finally, motivated by its love, extinguishes itself (Schimmel, 142). But when extinguished the lover simultaneously achieves *baqa*, persistence in God. As Hujwiri (Nicholson, 1976, 245) says, “Whoever is annihilated from his own will subsists in the will of God...” Hujwiri (245) maintains that this is possible because there is no “annihilation of substance but of attributes”. Significantly, Hallaj would seem to have expressed the same idea, and perhaps again to be proclaiming the culmination of the Path, when he declared “*ana’l-tajawuz*” (“I am crossing over”, “I am passing from one thing to another”). Indeed, Massignon (1975, 53) sees him as meaning that he is an exemplar, or transformation, “de Dieu transportee en l’homme.”⁷

The logic of the *tariqa* Hallaj’s statement underscores and demonstrates the underlying logic of the Path, a logic of continual transformation which brings about a cumulative one. The various states and stages of the Path can be seen as metaphors. This would be consistent with the insights of perhaps the greatest of Sufi sheikhs ‘Ibn Arabi (d. 1240).

According to Corbin (1982, 13) Ibn Arabi stressed the importance of *ta’wil*, which Corbin explains as meaning “essentially symbolic understanding, the transmutation of everything visible into symbols.” And further, following in Ibn

'Arabi's terms, when the Sufi engages in symbolic understanding, i.e, when he embarks on the Path, he has entered the *alam al-mithal*, the realm of images of which the Path consists. Each metaphor in the Path brings about a transformation, a transformation of the metaphor which preceded it – hence the Sufis could talk about renouncing renunciation. Each metaphor also elicits the next. This is the nature of metaphor, to create as it negates, and it is important to emphasize that each metaphor subsumed that which came before. Each stage therefore remained a part of the overall process, and is thus both a metonym and a metaphor.

Since the process of successive transformations is cumulative, the final stages of gnosis and love encompass all that come before them. The entire path can therefore be recapitulated by reference to them. Since they are the endpoints of the Path, including all that came before, they are the ultimate mediators between man and God. Wagner (1978) has labeled and described such a sequence of cumulative metaphorization as obviation, and notes that such a conclusion to a process is determined by it. Wagner (36) writes that a process of obviation “carries mediation to its ultimate conclusion by the very continuity that makes its closing term a mediation of the original dialectal polarity”.

The *tariqa* thus ends in the midst of mediation. But though the final stages encompass the whole, they are part of each of the steps. Because they give the whole its meaning, they motivate the Path from moment to moment, effecting each of the transformations. Thus, it is not only that the major transformation is effected by a series of minor ones, but also that the minor transformations are motivated by the major one. Further, since the process stems from the ultimate transformation which is to be effected, the culminating metaphors are also the original mediators between the initial opposition, and the process returns to the beginning. This is in keeping with the nature of obviation: the sequence is “self-containing and self-closing” (Wagner, 35). Being recursive, it returns to its original point. Or as the Sufis say “who begins in God ends in Him” (Schimmel, 106).

III. Conclusion

The Path is endless. Once the initial opposition has been mediated, the sequence is self-motivating, effecting and transforming itself by setting up a series of minor oppositions, dissolving each one in its turn and transforming the whole in the process. It is thus not surprising to that the Sufis speak of love as endless, and consistent with the Beloved having no end (Schimmel 45).

The same is true of gnosis, given that it is *ma'rifa* as the flow of tropes which creates the *tariqa* from moment to moment. Also, since the Path does consist of this endless series of instants, it is neither surprising to find the Sufi being called *ibn al-waqt*, “the son of the present moment” (Schimmel 130). And because at every moment he is drawing closer to God, for the Sufi, Being is a state of perfect Becoming.

Clearly, the Path has enormous potential for effecting a transformation, as attested to by Hallaj, and just as Hallaj can be seen as a manifestation of love, so may the Path. It is through love that the culmination is realized, for love that it is achieved. The Path, therefore, can be seen as providing a model of and for the transformative power of love, becoming in itself a guide to love’s potential for enriching the human condition.

1 It might be noted that all Muslims, whether Sufis or not, have the potential to transform themselves spiritually and are normatively guided to do so by the tenets of Islam. For a largely implicit, yet insightful, discussion of this see Murata and Chittick (1994).

2 According to one tenth century chronicler, Hallaj was believed to have had an “ardent desire for a change of government” (Schimmel, p. 65), and it was also suspected that he was a Shia’ extremist (Massignon, p. 100).

3 I should note that of course the Path has had a myriad of permutations from a host of Sufi sheikhs. But I am treating was meant to effect the transformation by allowing the pious to achieve greater purity (*safaa* in Arabic, from which *at-tasawwuf*, or Sufism, may be derived).

4 As al-Kalabadhi (d. 995) writes, “Some say ‘The Sufis were only named Sufis because of the purity of their hearts...’” But he also notes “Others have said: ‘They were only named Sufis because of their habit of wearing wool (suf).’” Many commentators opt for the last derivation. Interestingly, as if to support the latter possibility, Ibn Khaldun (1958, p. 77) writes “Sufis were opposed to people wearing gorgeous garments and therefore chose to wear wool.”

5 Schimmel (pp. 130-131) states that they were often considered complementary to one another. For example, al-Ghazzali stressed their complementarity: “love without gnosis is impossible – one can only love what one knows.”

6 Again, Rumi (Chittick, p. 215) is worth noting here: “Love is the alchemist’s elixir: It makes the earth into a mine of meanings.”

7 It is also significant that *tajawuz* is etymologically related to *majaaz* – “metaphor.” Both come from the root verb *jaaza*, which includes in its meanings “to go beyond,” “to overstep,” “to cross,” “to pass,” as well as “to forego” and “to relinquish” (Wehr, 1976, pp. 147-149).