

DIVINE LOVE

Islamic Literature and the Path to God

William C. Chittick

Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Yale

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FOREWORD

The musician of love, what wondrous musical instrument and playing it possesses,
For whatever melody it plays has a path to some Abode.
May the world be never empty of the moaning of lovers,
For it bears a sweetly melodious and heart-wrenching song.

—(Ḥāfīz)

Can one who has not loved write of love? To this question one can respond by asking, Has there ever been someone who has not loved? Indeed, no one can write of love effectively who has not loved, but in order for such writing to convey something of the reality of love, the person must have been able to go beyond that first stage of love, which is love for oneself. Human beings begin to love themselves as soon as they become aware of their own selves as distinct from others. Even men and women who “hate themselves” for one reason or another are attached to and “love” that element within themselves that “hates their selves.” For the spiritual person, however, this hating of themselves—or more precisely, lower selves, or *nafs*—is the first stage toward the love of that which lies beyond themselves and ultimately the love of God, which resides already in the heart of His creatures, whether they are aware of it or not. The process of realization in Islamic spirituality involves becoming aware of the ever-expanding circle of what one loves until that ever-widening circle reaches the shore of Divinity and one realizes the love of God and, moreover, becomes aware that this love is the only real love (*al-‘ishq al-ḥaqīqī*), while all other love is metaphorical love (*al-‘ishq al-majāzī*) and a reflection of that one real love that, in the words of Dante at the end of his *Divine Comedy*, “moves the sun and the stars.”

Not everyone whose love has reached the other “shore of existence” and who has experienced the love of God has written about it. But those who have done so have set out to express that love because of their love for God’s creatures, whom God loves. It has been the vocation of such authors to write of supreme love in order to guide others to the abode of the Beloved, not for any worldly end. And since in the principial domain, love and beauty are combined, a wedding that we experience on the human plane also, their exposition of love has usually been combined with great beauty of expression, whether in poetry or prose.

Islamic spirituality is impregnated with love combined with principial knowledge, as we already see in the Qur’an and the Hadith. The *fedeli d’amore* of Islam have emphasized over and over that love and knowledge complement each other on the spiritual plane. To love God is to know Him, for how can one love that which one does not know? And God is also the Ultimate Reality, one of whose names is *al-Wadūd*, or Love, and so one cannot know Him without loving Him. He is Love and the source of all love. The Sufis often distinguish between real love and metaphorical love, but even metaphorical love is but a ladder that can lead those who yearn for God to the supreme Love that is His alone. The supreme commandment of Christ to love God and to love one’s neighbor refers, from the Sufi point of view, not to two loves but to a single Love that pervades all reality. As the famous sacred tradition (*ḥadīth qudsī*) asserts, God was a hidden treasure (*kanz makhfī*) who *loved* to be known, *aḥbābtu an u’raf*, that is, “I loved to be known,” and created the world so that He would be known. This hadith, quoted so often in Sufi texts, not only reveals the principial intertwining of knowledge and love, but also asserts that Divine Love (*al-ḥubb*), combined with knowledge, is the cause of the creation of the world.

Moreover, since God is the Ultimate Cause of all things, His Love for us precedes and is the cause that allows us to love Him. One of the greatest expositors in Islam of the meaning of love, Aḥmad Ghazālī, writes in his *Sawānīḥ* that the greatest distinction of human beings is that God loved them before they could love Him, according to the well-known Qur’anic verse *yuhibbuhum wa yuhubbūnah*, “He loves them and [therefore] they love Him.” The *wa* in Arabic, which usually means “and,” implies implicitly in this verse “therefore.” The verse does not say that they love God and therefore God loves them, but asserts that Love begins from the Divine side. Of course, from a human point of view we must exert our will to love God. Metaphysically, however, we cannot love God unless He loves us. The person whom God does not love because of his or her rebellion against Him or disobedience to His commands will not find the love of God in his or her heart, although this love exists in the heart of all

human beings by virtue of their being human, even if in many cases it remains hidden and latent, unbeknown to one whose heart has hardened.

One may wonder why so many Western and modern writings on Islam neglect the central reality of love in Islamic piety and spirituality and refuse to consider the relation between Islam and the unparalleled richness of Islamic literature devoted to love, not to speak of the role of love in everyday Islamic devotion. There are many reasons for this myopia, including the centuries-old Christian polemic that seeks to present Christianity as the religion based on love, in contrast to Islam, which, according to them, has the concept of the Divine only as the God of judgment and retribution. They speak as if there were no hell or purgatory in Christianity, and no forgiveness, compassion, or love in Islam.

A thorough discussion of this important issue is not possible in this foreword, but suffice it to say that as a complete religion, Islam of necessity emphasizes also the importance of the fear of God in man's religious life in addition to love and knowledge. It was not a Muslim but the Bible that said, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," a saying that is repeated almost word for word in a well-known hadith of the Prophet. To know God, we must love Him, and to love Him, we must fear Him. The fear of God must not be confused with the ordinary meaning of fear as a negative emotive state. As Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ghazālī said, when a person fears a creature, he runs away from it, but when that person fears the Creator, he runs toward Him. There is something in the soul of man that prevents him from attaining spiritual perfection. That something has to shrivel through fear of the Majesty of God and His Justice so that the higher elements of the soul can be freed to love God. From the human point of view there is the hierarchy of fear, love, and knowledge that the soul marching toward perfection must experience successively.

The present book is one of the most perceptive and authentic works written in English on the theme of love in Islamic spirituality. Some might criticize the book as incomplete because it deals with sources only up to the sixth/twelfth century, but that quibble would be irrelevant, based as it is on unawareness of the nature of the historical unfolding of the tradition of Islamic spirituality. Yes, many Muslim authors after the sixth/twelfth century have written important works on love in both prose and poetry, but the sixth/twelfth century served as a watershed for what was to follow, and limiting oneself to earlier centuries does not mean neglecting any of the central teachings of Islamic spirituality on love.

Moreover, the present work deals solely with prose works in Arabic and Persian. The reader might ask why, in light of there being so many masterpieces

in poetry dealing with love, poetic works have not been included. The answer is that there are already numerous studies and translations of the poetic tradition, including Chittick's own well-known work *The Sufi Path of Love*, which deals with the poetry of one of the greatest Sufi masters who sang constantly of love, namely, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. By contrast, the very rich tradition of works on love in prose is hardly known in the West. The author's careful translations of writings by figures such as Maybudī and Sam'ānī open the door to a whole literary world of great significance practically unknown to readers of English until now. One has to commend the author for his judicious choice of works treated as well as his meticulous translations and penetrating analyses.

The Sufi authors whose writings are treated here described love not on the basis of the descriptions of others but from their own experience of Divine Love. As for the author of the present volume, when one reads his treatment, one feels that he not only combines the finest scholarship with love for the works he is treating, but also loves the subject with which these texts are concerned. The result is a major work of scholarship in the field of Sufism as well as a valuable treatise on Islamic spirituality in general, from which emanates something of the perfume and light of the *baraka*, or grace, of the reality of Sufism, a reality that is always imbued with love for the One and also for the many in light of the One.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr
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