Gott ist schön
und Er liebt die Schönheit

God is beautiful
and He loves beauty

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From the beginning of her career as an Islamicist, Annemarie Schimmel has devoted her energies particularly to the elucidation of the nuances of mystical love in the Sufi tradition. As early as her Inaugural-Dissertation, she pointed out the importance of the fact that the Sufis “see love as the central quality, even directly as the Essence, of God.”¹ This position, which is associated above all with the Sufi martyr Ḥusayn ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj (d. 922), is one of the boldest formulations of Islamic mysticism.² To equate God’s essence with love means, paradoxically, that the absolute divinity is essentially related to the limited creature in some unfathomable way; love implies both a lover and a beloved. The idea of God as love constitutes a problem for conservative Islamic thinkers, since it conflicts with their abstract theological categories and does not have an obvious scriptural basis on the Qur’ān. Islamic philosophers and Sufis, however, welcomed this concept, since it accorded with their own theories and experiences.³ Hallāj’s originality in this respect, and his proximity to philosophical positions, were first set forth in a memorable essay by Louis Massignon.⁴ Here I

would like to reexamine the concept of God's essence as love according to one of Hallāj's followers, the great Persian Sufi of Shiraz, Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209). Massignon, in his care to emphasize the uniqueness of Hallāj's spirituality, failed adequately to appreciate the centrality of the notion of God's essence as love in the thought of Rūzbihān. This not surprising, since medieval Sufis in Persianate Central Asia and India also failed to comprehend Rūzbihān's position on occasion. But the availability of Rūzbihān's remarkable treatise on love, the 'Abhar al-'ishqīn, enables us to see more clearly how love as the divine essence functioned as a dominant motif for Rūzbihān.

Massignon regarded Hallāj's doctrine of divine love as an important step that brought Sufism in contact with Hellenistic philosophy. The tenth-century philosopher and Sufi al-Daylami had pointed out that Hallāj was virtually alone among early Sufis in saying that love was the divine essence. Nonetheless, as al-Daylami mentioned, there were definite precedents for this view, for instance, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus. Islamic philosophers like Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) clearly followed suit in calling love part of the divine essence. Hallāj's step had been fundamental, however, as "a radical decentering of human desire, for a metaphysical reorientation." The key term here was 'ishq or passionate love, of non-Qur'ānic origin and similar in connotation to the Greek eros. Scriptural purists, we are told, were unhappy with this disturbing term and preferred the milder word mahabbā or compassionate love. This word had the advantage of Qur'ānic origin and relatively milder associations than with 'ishq. Hallāj had expounded on 'ishq in a long fragment preserved by al-Daylami. Massignon was disturbed to find that in the version of this text preserved by Rūzbihān, in nine out of ten places the word 'ishq had been replaced by the less controversial mahabbā. Writing in 1950, Massignon exhibited a real irritation with Rūzbihān for changing the text in a way that had previously blocked him (in the 1922 Passion de Hallaj) from appreciating the uniqueness of the position of Hallaj. Massignon, he argued, while 'ishq is dynamic; 'ishq removes anthropomorphism and leads to the divine presence. In retrospect, it seems that Louis Massignon's views were in this case molded by his own theology and by his strong personal connection to Hallāj. Massignon identified Hallāj both with personal mysticism and with philosophy, and anything that detracted from his uniqueness was to be challenged. Rūzbihān, however, was more interested in mystical experience than in philological niceties. For him Hallāj was important as one of several articulators of this doctrine, but the main point was that God, in his essence, is love.

Rūzbihān was well known in the Sufi hagiographies as a lover of beauty, and he set his own seal in this style on the sayings of earlier mystics. In their enthusiasm for music and ecstasy, Indian Chishtīs of the fourteenth century quoted Rūzbihān as saying that, "A singer should be beautiful of face, for the gnostics in the gathering of samā' require three things to refresh their hearts: sweet fragrances, a fair face, and beautiful voices (rawa'īth-i tayyiba wa ruy-i sabīha wa aswāt-i māliha)." This saying is also recalled by authors in Central Asia such as Jāmi (d. 1492). This saying is not actually Rūzbihān's, but is extremely grateful to Daniel Massignon for making a photocopy of this important manuscript available to me.

5 Massignon, "Interférences," p. 289.
7 Rūzbihān Baqlī, Mantiq al-asrār, MS Louis Massignon, fols. 56b-57b. I am extremely grateful to Daniel Massignon for making a photocopy of this important manuscript available to me.
8 Massignon, "Interférences," p. 270.
10 Rukn al-Dīn ibn 'Imād al-Dīn Dābulrī Khuldābādī, Shamā'il al-ṣāyi'a, ed. Sayyid 'Atā' Husayn, Sīsīla-i Isfahān al-Ulūm, no. 85 (Hyderābād: Matba'at al-Azharī Press, 1341/1928-9), p. 359, quoting Shaykh Rūzbihān's Kashf al-asrār. Given the Chishtīs' application of this saying to samā', it is noteworthy that Daylami's version of the saying (the oldest known to us) makes no mention of the voice. In several other places (pp. 14, 74, 205, 311, 346, 416), Rukn al-Dīn quotes, in Persian, the Kashf al-asrār, which happens to be the title of Rūzbihān's Arabic autobiography; evidently by this Rukn al-Dīn means instead the Persian taṣfīr of the same title by 'Abd Allāh Ansārī's disciple Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybūdī (ca. 520/1126).
11 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi', Nafaṣāt al-ins fī ẓiyarat al-quds, ed. Mahfīz
a version of a saying attributed to him to the early Egyptian Sufi Dhū al-Nūn (d. 859): “Whoever becomes the intimate of God (ista’nasā billah) becomes intimate with every beautiful thing (shayr malāḥ), every fair face (ṣawj sabiḥ), every pretty voice (sawt tayyib), and every sweet fragrance (rā’iba tayyiba).” Although this saying of Dhū al-Nūn has also been quoted as early as the tenth century by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Dāylamī, Rūzbihān had evidently become the chief transmitter of it in the eastern Islamic world. This might explain the confusion over the attribution of this saying to Rūzbihān by Persian and Indian Sufis.

This saying of Dhū al-Nūn was controversial, and to some it evidently suggested anthropomorphic heresy, although Rūzbihān regarded it as one of Dhū al-Nūn’s shathiyyāt or ecstatic sayings. At this point in the manuscript of Rūzbihān’s Mantiq al-asrār, a marginal note by an unknown writer complains, “Everything that this imbecile writer says regarding the divine unity could be found in the sayings of Pharaoch, may God’s curse be on both of them!” Regardless of such criticism, it seems that, following al-Dāylamī and Rūzbihān, the Persian and Indian Sufis located this saying in the lore of love and intoxication. Rūzbihān’s emphasis on Dhū al-Nūn’s saying in the context of love and ecstasy meshed with his own vocation as a lover. Other versions of Dhū al-Nūn’s saying found in Arabic sources (Abū Nu’aym al-Isfahānī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Ṣuyūṭī) do not connect it to love at all, but to other spiritual experiences. They see it in terms of the dialectic between awe (hayba) and intimacy (uns), and they transmit it as follows: “Whoever becomes the intimate of God then becomes intimate with all that he sees, hears, or feels in the realm (mulk) of his Lord; he becomes intimate with the smallest atom, all the while experiencing awe (hayba).” It is remarkable to see how the Persian and Indian Sufi traditions moved Dhū al-Nūn’s saying in the direction of love and ecstasy.

A little-known text from India furnishes a testimony of mixed value about Rūzbihān’s theory of love. Ashraf Jahāngīr Simnānī (d. 1425), originally from Central Asia, settled in northern India and joined the Chishti order. He devoted one of his letters (no. 49 in the Aligarh collection) to elucidating Rūzbihān’s views on love, ostensibly to clarify how his position differed from that of others. Simnānī’s exposition is, however, troubling. Most of it consists of a lengthy quotation from Rūzbihān’s preface to the ‘Abhar al-ʿašiqīn, although with some gaps large enough to interfere with the argument. More problematic is the way in which Simnānī appears to misrepresent Rūzbihān’s position, precisely on the question of love as the essence of God. In his preface, Rūzbihān had introduced the questions of whether passionate love or desire (ʾišq) was an appropriate term to use with respect to God, whether one can claim this love, and whether this name is shared by God and humanity. Rūzbihān acknowledged that there were differences on these points, but (in a passage skipped by Simnānī) he maintains that those who appeared to deny divine love were in reality merely concealing

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13 Rūzbihān, Mantiq al-asrār, fol. 13b.

14 Ibn ʿArabī, La vie merveilleuse de Dhū-l-Nūn l’Égyptien, trans. Roger Deladrière (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), p. 145, loosely rendering Deladrière’s French, the Arabic original is not given. Deladrière comments that Ibn al-ʿArabī locates this experience in the sensory world (mulk), while the version given by Abū Nu’aym and Suyūṭī refers it to the angelic realm (malakāt).

15 Ashraf Jahāngīr Simnānī, Maktūbāt-i aṣḥafīyya, MS History Department, Aligarh Muslim University, letter no. 49, fol. 145a-47a, quoting Rūzbihān Baṣṣīlī Shīrāzī, ‘Abhar al-ʿašiqīn, v. 9, lines 2-14; p. 10, lines 2-15; p. 11, lines 4-17.
it from the gaze of the vulgar. Rūzbihān then listed an impressive number of early Sufis who upheld the legitimacy of speaking of God in terms of 'ishq: 'Abd al-Wāhid ibn Zayd, Abū Yazīd, Junayd, Nūrī, Dīū al-Nūn, Yūsuf ibn Ḥusayn Rāzī, Abū Bakr Wāṣītī, Ḥusrī, Hallāj, and Shiblī (this would argue against the uniqueness of Ḥallāj’s position as represented by al-Daylamī). Simnānī reproduced this list, but surprisingly, he went on to interpolate a second list of Sufis who restrict love to a human beloved: Abū al-Qāsim Gurgānī, Rūzbihān Baqlī, Muhammad Ḥusayn Abū Tālib Dimashqī, and Abū al-Qāsim Tirmidhī.16 Whatever may be said about the three other, relatively obscure figures on this list (none of whom is even mentioned by Rūzbihān), Simnānī’s report about Rūzbihān’s position is simply false (see below). Why indulge in this distortion? One might speculate that the controversial character of this point led Simnānī (or perhaps a copyist of Rūzbihān’s work) to invent a spurious retraction for Rūzbihān, so that the exposition of love as the divine essence is simply being described, not actually advocated. In this way Simnānī could discuss it without getting himself or his source, Rūzbihān, involved in charges of innovation or anthropomorphism.

Part of the problem can be explained from the flexibility with which Rūzbihān uses the terms mahabbā and 'ishq. He is not confined to textbook definitions.17 Sometimes in the ‘Abhar al-ʻāshiqīn he identifies the two terms totally, speaking of the “mahabbā that is an essential attribute of God, by which the lover (‘āshiq) and beloved (mašhūq) are described.”18 He refers to mahabbā as the inner reality (haqīqa) of 'ishq, but on the same page calls it 'ishq when one has been submerged in the divine reality; these references occur in the chapter on “mahabbā

as the introduction to ‘ishq.”19 Presumably this lack of systematic rigor should be called unphilosophical, and Rūzbihān was certainly not a philosopher. Curiously, though, in his technical treatise on one thousand spiritual states, the Mashrab al-arwāh, he goes so far as to quote the very same definition of love by Heraclitus that had been cited by al-Daylamī. Rūzbihān even praised the pagan philosopher as “Heraclitus the wise, from the divine ancients.”20 In any case, the concluding chapter of Rūzbihān’s ‘Abhar al-ʻāshiqīn, “On the Perfection of Love,” is worth quoting, more for its poetic than philosophic qualities:

Know, my brother—may God nourish you and enoble you with the ‘ishq of the perfect ones—that the Lord—who is transcendent and sublime—in pre-and post-eternity is qualified with His primordial essence, with His primordial attributes. ‘Ishq is one of the attributes of the Real; He Himself is His own lover (‘āshiq). Therefore, love, lover, and beloved are one. From that love there is a single color, for the Attribute is He, and He is above the changing of temporality. ‘Ishq is the perfection of mahabbā and mahabbā is the attribute of the Real. Do not be tricked by words, for ‘ishq and mahabbā are one.21

Ultimately, for Rūzbihān, both ‘ishq and mahabbā described the essence of divine love. It may be that there are different tonalities of the two words that are more appropriate for different audiences. When Rūzbihān translated his own Mantiq al-asrār from Arabic into Persian as the Sharḥ-i shahīyyat for the use of his disciples, as Massignon points out, certain passages were not translated.22 To me it seems more likely that they were omitted with regard to the nature of the intended audience rather than as an index of changing views or fears of repression on Rūzbihān’s part.

One other early use of the word ‘ishq does suggest a controversial aura when the term was first introduced in Sufi

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16 Ibid., fol. 146a. In the first list, the MS omits Ḥusrī and mistakenly calls the first person named ‘Abd Allāh instead of ‘Abd al-Wāhid.
17 For some classical attempts to relate mahabbā to 'ishq, see Schimmel, “Begriff,” pp. 40-42.
18 Rūzbihān, ‘Abhar al-‘āshiqīn, p. 22.
19 Ibid., p. 15.
circles; this was the saying of Nūrī, “I love (aʿshaqū) God and He loves (yaʿshaqū) me.”23 This is alleged to be the reason why Nūrī was charged in the caliphal court with heresy, since mahabbah is Qur’ānic but ‘ishqh is an innovation suggestive of eroticism and anthropomorphism.24 The versions of Nūrī’s saying quoted by Sarrāj and Rūzbihān do show a certain defensiveness, as for instance when Nūrī (perhaps disingenuously) amplifies his saying by emphasizing that ‘ishq is restrained, while mahabbah implies enjoyment of the beloved.25 In commenting on this saying, Rūzbihān shows no signs of shyness about the term ‘ishq, however; it becomes here the divine quality that underlies the creation of the world and humanity. Nor does he distinguish it from mahabbah; the two words are, once again, nearly synonymous.

‘Ishq and mahabbah are two streams from the ocean of eternity, which run into the confluence of the soul. They are the special attributes of the Real, and He is described by them. When He gazes at ‘ishq, He creates the world with His will; this is universal ‘ishq. When He produces the lover with this ‘ishq, He gazes upon him with the primordial Essence (dhāt); that is the elite ‘ishq. He knows this from Himself with primordial knowledge. That is affection (dūstī) for God among the prophets and saints. Know that “He loves (yuḥbbū) them and they love (yuḥbbūnā) Him” [Qur. 5.59] refers to purely primordial attributes. It is beyond the slightness of nature and the variation of the temporal. He became the lover of His own beauty in eternity. Necessarily, love (‘ishq), lover, and beloved became one. Because this was a [divine] Attribute, no temporal cause affected it. Since He became His own lover, He wanted to create humanity, so that there should be a place of love and His glance would be undisturbed, and His own intimacy and eternity created the spirits of the lovers. He made their eyes see by His beauty. He taught them that “I was your lover before you were.” “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known.”26

Thus ‘ishq still retains some of the cosmic and philosophical associations it had with Hallāj. If ‘ishq had controversial implications in the tenth century, this appears not to have been the case for Rūzbihān in the twelfth century.

The use of a term like “essence” (dhāt) in Arabic is indeed an “interference” of Greek philosophy in Islam. Yet despite his acknowledgement of Heraclitus, Rūzbihān finds his authority for understanding God as love in traditional rather than in rational materials. Hadith sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and a whole array of early Sufis stand in evidence for the primacy of ‘ishq.27 It may be that Rūzbihān reinterpreted certain of his predecessors, like Dhū al-Nūn, in order to fit better with his own position. But Rūzbihān, in contrast to Louis Massignon, did not see Hallāj as a single lonely figure rising beyond philosophy and mysticism to forge a synthesis of the two. Nor did Rūzbihān find that the terms of mysticism are “fixed stars in the linguistic heaven of humanity.”28 Our fuller access to the writings of Rūzbihān allows us to correct some aspects of this early, brilliant analysis by Massignon. There remains, however, the paradox of a perfect God whose essence it is to love an imperfect creation. This goes beyond philosophy.

23 Manṭiq, fol. 14a; Shahr, p. 165, no. 95, in the form “I am the lover of God (mun bā-khuḍāy ‘aštiq-um).”
26 Shahr, pp. 165-66.
27 For a summary of these precedents, see Henry Corbin, En Islam iranien, Aspects spirituels et philosophiques (4 vols., Paris: Gallimard, 1971), III, 74-75.