

Themes of “The Erotic” in Sufi Mysticism

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is, in the human experience, a connection between sexuality and religion. This connection can be found in all religions and in all ages. In the religions of the post-axial age, from approximately 500 B.C.E. to the present, the sexual half of this equation has been little emphasized, or has been expressed only esoterically. As well, sexuality in religious thought and expression has often been subsumed by the more abstract theme of love. However, though sexuality is often hidden, or even is masked by orthodoxy, it remains a vibrant ingredient of religion. This is most apparent within mysticism.

I will focus on only one aesthetic of sexuality in religious expression: the theme of the erotic. To narrow the topic yet further, I will examine it within the Islamic tradition only. I will look briefly at sample instances of the erotic in a few different religions and then will examine in greater depth the erotic in Sufism.

The theme of the erotic within religion can be, pardon the pun, a touchy one. On the one hand, a person’s religious beliefs, if sincere, will surely be of paramount importance to him or her. Misinterpretations of or challenges to those beliefs would be no small matter. In many cultural paradigms, sexuality is seen as being far removed from spirituality, the former being a very worldly concern and the latter an other-worldly one.

Such a tension is usually unfounded. There is a dialectic between sexuality and spirituality within Islam, but not an oppositional one. However, since the potential for misunderstanding is so great, it is all the more essential that I be clear about what exactly the topic is and what the parameters of my investigation will be. I will therefore start with an extended introduction to and background of the topic, narrowing down what exactly is meant in this context by some of these broad and often loaded terms, such as the “erotic.” and even “sensuality.” By defining some of the key terms and concepts up front I hope to present clearly what the topic at hand consists of and, equally importantly, what it does not consist of. Since our understandings of these themes are very much culturally conditioned, I will briefly explore here what the term “erotic” signifies and suggests to modern Occidental ears. After establishing this foundation, I present some examples of sexual and erotic expression in the history of religions. This will demonstrate the universality of this phenomenon within history and human experience. Following this, I examine the theme within the tradition of mystical Islam.

¹ Written for a graduate-level course at the University of Toronto, 1996; posted online (www.bahai-library.com/winters_themes_erotic_sufism) in 1997; updated for grammar and cleanup in 2016.

2. THE MEANING OF “EROTIC”

Three superficial components of the word *erotic* are “of or concerning, tending to arouse, or dominated by sexual love and desire.”² This is accurate, for the common understanding of eroticism seems to be just this, and little more. However, the meanings of the word need not be confined to the physical: another dictionary gives “of or pertaining to sexual love; treating of love; amatory.” Also revealing, the word *erotic* can be used as a noun: “an amorous composition or poem; also, a theory or doctrine of love.”³

Eros was originally a very positive figure. For Hesiod, the oldest of the extant Greek poets, he was “the fairest of the deathless gods” but his character later became mischievous, naughty, and even evil.⁴ A similar degeneration can be seen with Cupid, Eros’s Roman counterpart, as “cupidity” came to signify excessive lust or avarice. The affections of the Greeks and the Romans turned instead to the more chaste Aphrodite/Venus who, though she could signify sexual love as well as beauty (e.g., “aphrodisiac”), never represented crude physicality.⁵

The word “sensual,” which I will also use in this paper, has had a similarly unfortunate history. Though its literal meaning is nothing more than “pertaining to the senses,” it has long signified “gratification of the physical and especially the sexual appetites.”⁶ The jacket blurb for a recent book on sexuality and Christianity goes so far as to call sensuality “a twisted form of love that has resulted in unprecedented divorce rates, promiscuity, infidelity, teenage pregnancies, homosexuality, and abortion.”⁷ As far back as the eighteenth century, writers have been aware of this and have substituted another word; Coleridge wrote: “I have adopted from our elder classics the word *sensuous*, because *sensual* is not at present used, except in a bad sense.”⁸ English usage continues to observe this distinction.

I begin the discussion of the meaning of “erotic” with a truism—sex and love are not the same thing. Common sense and intuition attest to this, as do most religious and philosophical systems. Freud, to whom I’ll return shortly, provided empirically-verifiable theory to demonstrate this when he investigated the nature of the libido. Though Freud conflated love and sex, declaring love to be merely a sublimated abstraction of sex, his clinical analyses of sexuality

2 *The American Heritage Electronic Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “erotic.”

3 *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, 1909 ed., s.v. “erotic.”

4 Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 36.

5 I don’t mean to give the impression that these mythologies were monolithic; Venus could be quite wicked, and Cupid the protagonist. But in connotative use, Aphrodite/Venus never became negative. The term “venereal (disease)” aside, most of her words are positive, e.g. “venerate” and even “winsome.” Cf. *Webster’s*, s.v. “venerate.”

6 *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary*, s.v. “sensual.”

7 Paul deParrie, *Romanced to Death* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1989), back jacket blurb.

8 Quoted in *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, s.v. “sensuous.” Italics in original. Cf. also Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xviii.

provided a springboard for later psychologists, such as C. G. Jung and Erich Fromm, to draw clearer distinctions between the various forms of human love. Freud's observations of the power of the libido were partly validated by further research, e.g. that of Wilhelm Reich, but his derogation of love to a release of repressed sexuality has been abandoned by more enlightened thinkers.⁹

Paul Ricoeur, the influential phenomenologist of religion, noted three stages in the understanding of sexuality and religion in the West. In the first stage, the earliest days of humanity, there was no real separation between the two. But the axial age, when the world's major religions arose, witnessed a clear divorcing of the two—religion was defined transcendently, and sexuality became shameful. (Some words reflect this: “*pudendum*” is from *L. pudere*, to make or be ashamed.) Ricoeur noted that we now seem to be entering a third phase, one in which there is a push to reunite sexuality with the experience of the sacred.¹⁰

The erotic, in this third sense, refers to a unique energy which is not to be equated either with the instinct of libido or the social construct of lust. It is not an energy which is in any way immoral or shameful. Rather, erotic here will refer to the aesthetic of a sacralization of sexuality. It is the sexual instinct expressed through the channels of art, love, and, in the case of mysticism, spirituality. While it would be nice to have a synonym for erotic, one without its manifold connotations, there is no felicitous alternative; I ask the reader to keep in mind the term's specialized meaning in this context.

Because sex and love are not the same thing, the concept of love also needs to be defined for this context. As *erotic* means something other than, and more than, “sexual,” by *love* I mean something distinct from “erotic.” Whereas the theme of the erotic in philosophy and religion is usually only implicit, or even esoterically hidden, love is conspicuous. For example, a concordance indicates the word *love* is found over 400 times in the Bible, but derivations of the word *eros* are not found once. There has also been a wealth of research produced on concepts and themes of love in religion, but very little on eroticism. It is largely for this reason that I carefully do not address this paper to the theme of love, even though love will always be arching over and animating the topics at hand.¹¹

The above discussion is simple and incomplete; I present it here more as a caveat. The

9 Cf. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Perennial Library, 1956), 44-53, and James A. Mohler, S. J., *Dimensions of Love: East and West* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1975), 324-340.

10 James B. Nelson et al., eds., *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 72.

11 These distinctions have been well examined and clarified in Robert C. Solomon, “The Virtue of (Erotic) Love,” in Robert C. Solomon et al., eds., *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), pp. 492-518.

meaning and variety of mystic eroticism will become clearer as I relate some of its instances in the history of religions.

3. BACKGROUND: SEXUALITY IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN THOUGHT

The use of erotic and love imagery is a phenomenological constant in the history of religions—every religion seems to have its instances of it. I will survey some of these instances partly to demonstrate both the universality and the variety of this theme and partly to provide more of a background understanding of it. My examples are from prehistoric statuary, Greek philosophy, the Jewish Bible, Christian thought, and then some modern psychoanalytic understandings. To limit the scope of this introduction, I'll mention the only Eastern traditions in passing. The Islamic tradition will follow.

The connection between religion and sexuality seems to date back to the very earliest days of humanity. Our only real clues about the nature of religious belief in prehistoric times are from cave paintings and statuary. The other remnants from earliest human history, such as fossils, tools, and weapons, provide no insight into religion. Of this primordial art, two forms stand out in their ubiquity—phallic symbols and the so-called “Venus Figurines.”

The male human was rarely depicted as a whole body. Rather, he was represented primarily by phallic carvings and paintings. Even more common than these is depictions of the female body in small statues of rotund women. So many of these Venus figurines have been found that this symbolism has been referred to as “the *most* prominent feature in ...prehistoric religion.”¹² It has even been suggested that these statuettes represented, not just a celebration of femininity, but perhaps even the earliest manifestation of the concept of divinity.¹³ Whether or not the figurines can be said to represent proto-theologies, one aspect of them is undeniable. They seem to represent, not just maternity, but erotic sexuality. (Some scholars, like Richard Lewinsohn, have commented that these fat, faceless statues “must have been quite unerotic,”¹⁴ but this is hardly a fair statement. To impose modern aesthetics on such a distant culture is presumptuous, and, since humanity was still in the midst of an ice age, it is possible that most people were fatter than we are today.¹⁵) All of the accent on these statuettes is on the sexual features of breasts, *mons pubis*, and buttocks. Since there are few depictions of intercourse, pregnancy, birth, or children from the prehistoric period, it seems likely that it was not maternity, but sexual aesthetics, that was being glorified. No decisive conclusions can be made about either the erotic or the religious significance of these Venus figurines, but at least some connection is

12 Geoffrey Parrinder, ed., *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1971), 33 (italics added).

13 Parrinder, *World Religions*, 31.

14 Quoted in Reay Tannahill, *Sex In History* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1982), 35.

15 Cf. Tannahill, *Sex In History*, 35.

indubitable.

The modern Western world's understanding of themes of the erotic starts with the Greeks. Though Judaism obviously was the foundation of Christianity, it was Hellenistic thought that shaped the philosophy of the West. Hellenism was the first coherent philosophical tradition of the Occident, and also has deeply shaped Christianity and Islam.

The reader will have noted the care I took to clarify my terms (a necessity caused by the paucity of synonyms for certain things in English). "Love" is one of these words slighted by the language. Classical Greek, however, is more precise. It distinguishes *ἔρως* [*eros*], desirous love; *ἐπιθυμία* [*epithymia*], concupiscent love; *ἀγάπη* [*agape*], affectionate, benevolent love; and *φιλία* [*philia*], neighborly, brotherly love.

Mythological accounts of the god Eros go back at least to 900 B.C.E., the time of Hesiod, but it wasn't until the writings of Plato that he became a figure worthy of note. It is Plato who first elevates Love to the importance it later takes in Christianity: "He whom Love [*eros*] touches not, walks in darkness," Plato declares.¹⁶ Eros "gives to us the greatest goods," says Phaedrus in the *Symposium*, for "there is a certain guidance each person needs for his whole life, if he is to live well; and nothing imparts this guidance... as well as Love."¹⁷ Eros provides guidance by acting as a motive force to self-improvement and self-transcendence. The Platonic ideal for a human is meditation upon the immortal Forms and, ultimately, contemplative union with them by virtue of purifying the mind of animalistic dross. Eros represents the longing inherent in the incarnate human being for his or her original source. It is a spirit (*δαίμονιον* [*daimonion*]) which drives us to turn away from the world of the senses to seek transcendent union.¹⁸ Conversely, it is the concupiscent love, manifested by the many forms of lust, which binds us to the earthly realm.

Plato made a further distinction between heavenly and common love, though he represented both by the same goddess, Aphrodite. Aphrodite's "common love" side is that which seeks fulfillment in the human sphere. "This, of course, is the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys [and] to the body more than to the soul, ...since all they care about is completing the sexual act," explains Pausanias.¹⁹ Aphrodite's "heavenly love" side, by contrast, is "free from the lewdness of youth."²⁰ This is love which is mutual between souls, is infused with wisdom, and is less concerned with (though not wholly indifferent to) physical considerations. It is important to note that, though Plato said that the heavenly love is superior,

16 Hamilton, *Mythology*, 36.

17 Quoted in Robert C. Solomon et al., eds., *The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 14-15.

18 Mohler, *Dimensions of Love*, 72.

19 Quoted in Solomon, *Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, 16.

20 Solomon, *Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, 16.

he in no way scorned the common love. Speaking of the two, he pointedly noted “all the gods must be praised.”²¹

Plato, though he did not completely dismiss earthly love, put all of his emphasis on the transcendent. This philosophy of love proved to be quite long-lasting, for it was preserved in the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and reaffirmed by St. Augustine. However, there was a solid secular side to Greek erotic expression. First, the Hellenistic culture could be quite lewd, as Eva Keuls has demonstrated in *The Reign of the Phallus*.²² But that does not constitute eroticism as used in this context. Rather, I refer to the refined art of erotic expression found in the poetry of Sappho, later, Ovid. Sappho wrote poems of nostalgia and longing with very human subjects. Her writing expresses a greater depth of feeling and passion than does Plato’s model of tidy virtue. And yet, her art was metaphoric and spiritual enough to escape condemnation as simple sex eulogizing. Some modern scholars have even suggested that her love poetry was *purely* spiritual.²³

The New Testament is fairly devoid of eroticism. Greek and Essenic asceticism seems to have been a sufficient influence to make religious sentiments of the time, as Diane Ackerman puts it, “nonerotic and full of self-denial.”²⁴ By contrast, she describes heterosexual love in the Old Testament as being “sometimes down to earth, very material, and deliciously sensual.”²⁵ For example, the covenanted relationship between Yahweh and the Chosen People is expressed as a marriage—Israel is God’s bride.²⁶ Nowhere is this more evident than in the allegory of the Song of Solomon.

Solomon’s “Song of Songs” is a paean of love from a man to his soon-to-be bride. Far more than a simple expression of emotion, the future husband and wife loving describe the physical features of each other in very sensuous and sensual ways. They liken aspects and parts of each other’s bodies to fruits, trees, and animals in a beautiful garden, and sing of their impatience to consummate their marriage. Solomon concludes by begging his beloved to make the haste of a wild deer in returning to his side.

A literalist interpretation of the Song of Solomon is that it describes the love of a shepherd boy and his girlfriend.²⁷ Though attributing the poem to Solomon, the tenth century king of Israel, is historically impossible, Ackerman points out that it would at least be thematically consistent. He did, after all, supposedly have 700 wives and 300 concubines, and his

21 Solomon, *Philosophy of (Erotic) Love*, 16.

22 Keuls, Eva C. *The reign of the phallus: sexual politics in ancient Athens*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.

23 Tannahill, *Sex In History*, 100.

24 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love* (New York: Random House, 1994), 48.

25 Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 48.

26 E.g. Psalms 19:5.; Isaiah 61:10 and 62:5.

27 Mohler, *Dimensions of Love*, 91.

frequent marriages were part of a traditional fertility ritual.²⁸ The rabbinical tradition included mystical interpretations of the poem from the earliest days, but never seems to have done so at the expense of its profane side.²⁹ It was left to Christianity, and especially the mediaeval monastics, to provide such a coherent mystical interpretation of the song that its erotic side was fully de-emphasized.

The inheritor of Hellenistic thought is, interestingly enough, Christianity. Most obviously, the New Testament was composed in Greek. But more than this, says historian Jaroslav Pelikan, the Hellenization of Christianity “is a question not of language but of Weltanschauung [worldview].”³⁰ One major theme of Greek culture adapted to Christianity is that of love.

The exoteric Christian attitude towards sex can be summed up as follows. St. Paul taught that celibacy was superior to marriage. The eschaton, the end of time promised by Jesus, was believed to be immanent, and in light of the approaching demise of the human race marriage and sexuality could be at best a waste of time and energy. There were a few early Fathers who believed that sexuality could hold an honored place within Christianity, but the majority accepted the view later formalized by Augustine: sexuality is a necessary part of the natural order and, as a creation of God, must be intrinsically good. But God’s creation was tainted by certain aspects of human free will. Humanity sought to assert its own will over that of God, an act known as the original sin. As a consequence of and punishment for this all people are saddled with a disobedience that now is an integral part of them, namely, an inherited rebellious sexual nature. This inner disobedient will is manifested in even the greatest of (male) saints in the fact that they have no control over erection and nocturnal emission. Further, in Augustine’s theory this original sin is passed on to each person via the father’s semen. There is thus a tension between on the one hand honoring God’s creation by respecting sexuality, and on the other hand controlling the rebellious animal nature. People feel the pull of concupiscence and the revulsion of sin simultaneously; hence Augustine’s famous plea “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet!”³¹ The later Fathers thus realized that they had to declare marriage to be an often necessary

28 Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 9.

29 One element of the Judaic tradition did develop a school of thought connecting the erotic and the mystical. Paracelsus, 1493-1541, combined the Jewish Qabbalah with mediaeval alchemy in his theories of mystical union. Sexual intercourse, for him, is a reflection of the archetype of mystical union. However, this is so far on the fringes of Judaism that a discussion of it here would be out of place. Cf. Dan Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 263f., where sexual Qabbalism is presented along with and compared with al-‘Arabi’s thought.

30 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988) 114.

31 St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), Book eight, chapter vii, paragraph 17.

evil, but on the whole inferior to celibacy.³²

It would be easy to villainize Augustine for such a negative portrayal of human sexuality. For example, it has been alleged that he misread the Greek text of Romans 5:12 “...sin entered the world by one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...” as “sin entered the world *in* one man,” and from this misreading based his concept of original sin.³³ However, this dismissive reading of Augustine and his contemporaries would be a mistake. In reality, they connect sexuality and sin much less than is supposed, indicting instead humanity’s original disobedience. Augustine wrote a rather lengthy book *On the Good of Marriage*, devoted to elucidating the function of, and in places praising, human unions (*conjungio*). Elsewhere, he was not shy about describing things religious in erotic terms. For example, he portrays the Crucifixion thusly:

Like a bridegroom Christ went forth from his chamber, he went out with a presage of his nuptials....He came to the marriage bed of the cross, and there, in mourning it, consummated his marriage...he lovingly gave himself up to the torment in place of his bride, and he joined himself to the woman forever.³⁴

This is a side of Augustine’s thought that is rarely presented, and seems to have been forgotten by many Christian thinkers.

The tension in late Patristic thought between the supposed sin of human sexuality and the goodness of the divine creation laid the foundations for what Michel Foucault called a “pathologization of sex”: distrust of the physical sex drive and anxiety about its damning effects dominated the thought of early Mediaeval Christianity.³⁵ Sex was only unwillingly condoned, even between husband and wife: “He was allowed to kiss, fondle, and caress her—provided he didn’t really enjoy it,” writes Ackerman.³⁶ There was, however, a glimmer of light in this atmosphere of apprehensive asceticism, namely, the influence of the Greeks. As mentioned above, Greek has various words for love. A measure of acceptance of things sexual was preserved by a linguistic trick. Instead of using *eros* for love, as Plato had done, the writers and later interpreters of the New Testament used *agape*. Anders Nygren, in his magnum opus *Agape and Eros*, distinguishes sharply between the two words: *agape* is God’s way to man, and *eros* is man’s way to God. *Agape* has little sense of desire, for man is basically unlovable. God’s love for man stems from the universal, unselfish nature of *agape*.³⁷ God, however, is man’s ultimate

32 Cf. Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988).

33 Cf. Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, et al.

34 Quoted in Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 317.

35 John McManners, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 69.

36 Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 46.

37 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: S.P.C.K., 1932). Quoted in Mohler, *Dimensions of Love*,

goal and the source of his being. It is man's neediness and longing that spurs him to love God. Herein lies the path for humanity: God has granted a measure of agape to all humans,³⁸ and it is now our duty to discover this agape and express it amongst each other. God, in his very nature, *is* agape, and by manifesting it we become more spiritual.

The above discussion would suggest that the Christian tradition is universal in its trend to sublimate a dark and sinful erotic love to a chaste and ascetic love. I will conclude by showing yet another facet of Christian love. Fundamental to Christianity is a very clear-cut dualism: Creator and creation are eternally other. Yet, the *awe*-some degree to which God is so *wholly* "other" inspires, not just fear, but also fascination. Rudolf Otto explains that the utter mystery of divinity causes the creature both to cower and, at the same time, to be captivated. This can inspire a longing for that Wholly Other which can lead to a "Dionysiac intoxication."³⁹

Paul Tillich has explored this sense of longing by reemphasizing the erotic. "Eros," writes Tillich, is "the driving force in *all* cultural creativity and in *all* mysticism."⁴⁰ This is, to say the least, a surprising remark coming from such a prominent theologian. And this remark was not just a passing hyperbole—the erotic is central to and a decisive influence on Tillich's theology.⁴¹ To explain this, it must first be noted that Tillich was careful to draw a distinction between eros and simple sex. This distinction, which, he said, forced the New Testament authors as well as most subsequent Christians to steer clear of the term, resulted from an unfortunate confusing of *ἔρως*, desirous love, and *ἐπιθυμία*, concupiscence. Eros does not just seek pleasure by striving for union with another human being, but also strives for union with God. It is the longing to establish a full relationship, be that with a person, with one's social group, with sundered value paradigms, or with God; with, in short, anything from which one has become existentially alienated. Eros as a longing awareness of alienation becomes the dynamic force behind creativity, growth, and self-transcendence. It is "the moving power of life."⁴²

Tillich does not abandon agapic love, though. Agape remains the ultimate form of love, the universal expression of divinity. Indeed, one of the goals of spiritual living is to sublimate eros into agape, or at least to reconcile the two. The transcendent universality of agape makes it a less concrete element of human life than the erotic. (This concept of the erotic is relevant to the later discussion of Islam.)

38 Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 152.

39 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 31.

40 Paul Tillich, quoted in Alexander Irwin, *Eros Toward the World: Paul Tillich and the Theology of the Erotic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 1. Italics added.

41 Irwin, *Eros Toward the World*, 3.

42 Quoted in Irwin, *Eros Toward the World*, 8.

Brevity requires that I only discuss Western traditions in this introduction, but I don't want to leave the impression that the erotic in religion is only found in the Occident. Far from it; the Orient has produced some of the most fascinating interactions between the two to be found. For example, elements of Hinduism have turned religion into sexuality in the system of bhakti yoga, or the practice of union with God through love. Conversely, elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have turned sexuality into religion in the various systems of Tantra yoga, or the practice of elevating sex itself to the divine. The latter represent what I think are the clearest and most methodical of all schools of thought on the relation between mysticism and the erotic (and it must be pointed out that Tantra has been so thoroughly re-interpreted and sexualized by the contemporary West that it should more properly be termed *neo-tantra*). But it is back to the West and its psychoanalytic school that I turn in concluding this survey.

To a large extent, both our understandings and our *mis*-understandings of the erotic stem from Freud. Freud believed there to be two players in the drama of the erotic: pleasure and the recovering of lost union. However, unlike the religious traditions, Freud does not recognize a transcendental aspect to these players, but just the physical. Most forms of pleasure that we engage in as adults are unconscious imitations of pleasures we experienced as infants, e.g. nursing and excreting. Similarly, in our relationships the union we seek to restore is nothing mystical, but is simply a search for lost parents. A man seeks a woman who most closely resembles his mother, and a woman seeks a copy of her father. If sexuality harks back to childhood excretory pleasures and our partner is the simulacrum of a parent, then the whole idea of sexuality becomes perverted, and the meaning of love is belittled. Yet there is a good deal to be praised in Freud's work. He exposed the previously-unrealized extent of sexuality in human interrelationships, and demonstrated the power of the libido. But it seems that his emphasis on sexuality and love as nothing more than physical has harmed the respectability of the erotic. I feel that it is necessary to mention this here, for we can't understand the topic if we're unconscious of our residual cultural biases.

There is one aspect of Freud's thought that is directly relevant to the study of mysticism: love and death are intimately connected. This theory did not originate with Freud, as Ackerman points out—Schopenhauer had written of the symbolic relationship between the womb and death, and the earlier Elizabethans often used the euphemism “to die” to refer to sexual pleasure—but it took Freud to amplify these ideas and derive a coherent theory based on them.⁴³ There is a dialectic, Freud saw, between eros, the energy of procreative love, and thanatos, death. Eros as an impulse towards life, towards combination and development, is set against the movement towards death, the breakdown of structure and the cessation of stimulation.⁴⁴ “Only

43 Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 126.

44 William Graham Cole, *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 227.

by the mutually opposing action of the two primal instincts—*eros* and the death instinct—never by one or the other alone, can we explain the rich multiplicity of the phenomena of life,” wrote Freud.⁴⁵ All of our human lives, he believed, are lived beneath the penumbra of this struggle.

Freud understood that one of the main features of sex is the sequence from quiescence, to rising agitation, to the moment of release of excited tension, followed by a gradual return to quiescence. Freud found a parallel between this progression and the whole of the individual life cycle, such that there is a tendency to try to maintain, or to return to, unstimulated tranquility. As one author summarized it, if pain is defined as excitation and pleasure as the relief of that excitation, then the greatest pleasure of all would be death.⁴⁶ Combining the above theories gives the following process: all humans seek pleasure, and sex is one of the most primal and powerful pleasures, yet sex produces agitation, a “delicious tension.” While this excitement may be pleasurable, the individual’s goal shifts from seeking pleasure to resolving that tension and returning to a calm state. As the moment of orgasm, what Freud terms the “little death,” provides such a release, it is analogous with the event of real death.

There is one other implication of Freud’s *eros*-*thanatos* dialectic which the existentialist Tillich brought out. As explained above, Tillich found the motive force of life in a longing for one’s estranged foundations, and the goal being a rediscovering, a reunion with, that foundation. Irwin notes, though, that existentialism often focuses on the negative and painful aspects of anxiety and loneliness (Sartre best embodies this theme). Through the theme of the erotic, a positive element enters this predicament: namely, the possibility of overcoming it. Thus Tillich’s existentialism, in Irwin’s words, “evokes not doubt, alienation, and psychospiritual suffering, but a positive, eroticized existence.” Its defining characteristics and goals are knowledge, morality, creativity, and an “erotic passion for the divine.”⁴⁷ Tillich recognized that Freud’s libido, whether expressed as sexual desire towards a person or existential-erotic desire for God, is infinite and ultimately incapable of being fulfilled.⁴⁸ The complete resolution of erotic desire, or death, becomes its own goal — the exigency of which is, paradoxically, determined by its very unreachability.

This discussion does not cover the full range of themes of the erotic in Western religion, but merely demonstrates some salient aspects of this dynamic to lay a foundation for the following discussion, where I examine the relationship between mysticism and the erotic in the Islamic tradition more thoroughly.

45 Miriam Cooke, “Death and Desire in Iraqi War Literature,” pp. 184-199, in Allen, *Love and Sexuality*, 184.

46 Cole, *Sex in Christianity*, 226.

47 Irwin, *Eros Toward the World*, 158.

48 Irwin, *Eros Toward the World*, 33-34.

4. ELEMENTS OF THE EROTIC IN SUFISM

In the remainder of this paper I will present the theme of the erotic in Sufi mysticism by showing some specific instances, from the writings of select figures within the tradition. There are two reasons for this. First, to examine the subject diachronically would require a familiarity with over 1,300 years of writing and intellectual development. This is beyond both my grasp of the subject and the limited scope of this paper. Two, there is quite a range of expression of the topic in the history of Sufism, such that a unified distillation would distort the tradition.

There are a few themes that I wish to explore in Sufi mysticism. I will bring these up one by one in the course of chronologically presenting the thought of the following seven figures, each one representing a main theme. I will present the Prophet Muhammad, as the starting point of Islamic mysticism; Rabi`a, as the founder of the theme of Sufi love; al-Hallaj, whose writings are the locus classicus of impassioned union; al-Ghazzali, as the clear-headed systematizer and reconciler of mysticism with orthodoxy; Ibn al-Farid, as the composer of one of the greatest erotic love poems in Sufi literature; Ibn al-`Arabi, as a supreme philosopher of the erotic in the Sufi tradition; and Rumi, as the exponent of love best-known in the West.

The earliest foundation of the theme of the erotic in Arabic poetry predates Islam. Poetry was the primary form of literature, indeed, the main form of artistic expression, of the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* period (circa 500-622 C.E.). While there were many different types of poetic form, the *qasida*, or ode, was the only “finished” type.⁴⁹ The *qasida* tended to have a fairly invariant structure: a nomad would stumble upon the remains of a desert camp and sing of its desolation. His loneliness would inspire him to recall his fondness for those who had once encamped there, and he would describe with nostalgia the strength of his affection for his beloved, and frequently would describe her in detail. This section of the poem is called the *nasib*, “erotic prelude.”⁵⁰ Ibn Qutayba describes the *nasib*: here the poet (almost always male) “bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire.” Part of the poet’s motivation in including this was to “win the hearts of his hearers... since the song of love touches men’s souls and takes hold of their hearts.”⁵¹ After the *nasib*, the poet would praise his camel and the fortitude of the Bedouin people, and following all of the above would begin the body of the ode, usually a panegyric to his patron or a tale of battle.

49 Reynold A. Nicholson, “Pre-Islamic Poetry, Manners, and Religion.” *A Literary History of the Arabs* (London: Cambridge U.P), 1969. pp. 71-140, 76.

50 Sir Charles Lyall describes the *qasida* as usually beginning “with the mention of women and the constantly shifted habitations of the wandering tribesmen seeking pasture throughout the Winter and the Spring; the poet must tell of his love and its troubles, and, if he likes, may describe the beauty of his mistress.” Quoted in Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 163.

51 Quoted in Nicholson, *A Literary History*, 78.

The *qasida* was so central to Arab culture that, as one scholar wrote, “the image of the poet weeping at the memory of his lost love is considered the *main* expression of pre-Islamic literature’s concern with matters of love and sexuality.”⁵² However, the poet’s detailed descriptions of her were sensual only; Nicholson writes that “the physical charms of the heroine are fully described but we seldom find any appreciation of moral beauty.”⁵³ It was the revolutionizing influence of Muhammad that inspired the development of a spiritual side to erotic poetry.

Unlike founders of certain other religions, Muhammad figures relatively little in the theme of erotic mysticism. He was sometimes an object of love for the later Sufis, and certainly was often a focus of mysticism.⁵⁴ The Western student of Islam, writes Annemarie Schimmel, “will be surprised to see the strong ‘mystical’ qualities attributed to [Muhammad.]” And, she continues, one element of Islam that Orientalism has tended to overlook is “that quality of mystical love that his followers feel for him.”⁵⁵ However, his influence in themes of the erotic is more limited than that of the founders of some other religions is for their followers. For example, some mediaeval nuns were known to meditate on the body of Christ with a concentrated devotion approaching erotic fascination, a idea that would be quite alien to Islam.

The Qur’an elevates love to one of its central themes. In it, Muhammad writes numerous times of the promise of Allah’s love for those who lead righteous lives and the threat that love will be withdrawn should his followers be unrighteous. Besides this divine Platonic love, the Qur’an also speaks of earthly, interpersonal love. It declares that Allah has united the disunified peoples of the earth using the bond of love: “for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, ye became brethren...” (3:103). It also describes love as the bond solidifying marriage: “He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)” (30:21). Love is the energy that motivates humans to reproduce: “It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)... [and thus] He giveth them a goodly child” (7:189-190). There is only one mention in the Qur’an of things erotic, namely in the story of Joseph and his master’s wife Zulaika where “(with passion) did she desire him, and he would have desired her” (12:24). The ladies of the city later gossip that he had “inspired her with violent love” (12:30). Nothing comes of their mutual desire, though, and this particular incident in the tale of Joseph appears not to have inspired mystical interpretations. It

52 Hilary Kilpatrick, “Introduction: On Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature,” pp. 9-15, in Allen, *Love and Sexuality*, 9 (italics added).

53 Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 89.

54 An excellent study of the mysticism of Muhammad himself (though unrelated to the topic at hand) is chapter 8, “Muhammad and his Mi‘raj,” pp. 181-198, in Merkur, *Gnosis*.

55 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 27.

was left to the later Sufis to connect the themes of mysticism and the erotic.

The mystical thought of the first century following the Prophet was inspired by the same elements in religion that motivated Muhammad. At its basis, writes Gibb, was “the fear of God and of the Wrath to come”⁵⁶ — very different themes from later Sufism. Some scholars have seen such a divergence of focus from the Qur’an to second century Islamic mysticism that they have doubted that Sufis even originated with Muhammad, postulating rather that it must have grown out of relations with Nestorian and Monophysite Christians, mystical Judaism, or even Buddhist and Hindu influences.

It was in the writings of Rabi`a al-`Adawiyya (d. 801) that the *mysterium fascinans* began to take precedence over the *mysterium tremendum*. Rabi`a is credited as being the first to introduce the theme of love into Sufism—not just the pious love of God and the brotherly, tranquil love of one’s fellow Muslims, but an impassioned love whose only goal is unity with God. Though Rabi`a’s love of God and God only could be quite coldly ascetic at times—she was even said to have shut her windows to the flowers in spring in order not to be distracted⁵⁷—history treated her well. In a religion and an age where the role of women was anything but positive, where one text was careful to define Rabi`a as a “man” before praising her⁵⁸ and others went so far as to declare women to be created from the sediment of the sins of demons,⁵⁹ Rabi`a’s name quickly became a synonym for praiseworthy womanhood. To this day a woman is praised by being called a “second Rabi`a,” and the poet Jami said that “if all women were like [Rabi`a] then women would be preferred to men.”⁶⁰

Rabi`a was, first and foremost, a lover of God. This love for God was so absolute that she refused to compromise it by loving another human, even the Prophet himself. “I belong only to Him,” was her answer to Hasan al-Basri’s marriage proposal.⁶¹ Indeed, her love of God was so pure-minded that she rejected even some of the most basic tenets of her religion, as expressed in her famous prayer:

O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty.⁶²

56 H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 90.

57 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 39.

58 Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 40.

59 Campbell, 445.

60 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 435.

61 Quoted in Attar, *Muslim Saints*, 46. This is likely apocryphal; many scholars believe that they were not contemporaries.

62 Quoted in Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 226.

However, though she clearly introduced the theme of love, she does not seem to have used much symbolism of love in her poetry. Her descriptions of it tend to be very chaste. It was the next major Sufi figure, al-Hallaj, who seems to have inherited most profoundly Rabi`a's legacy. He was less meticulous about using traditional and non-sexual imagery, and was more explicit about the goal of union.

The love which inspired Rabi`a was, in Schimmels' words, a disinterested love, a love "for which God has not asked and for which He will not recompense the lover."⁶³ This sense of God's love was strengthened in the thought of many later Sufis, such as Abu'l-Husayn an-Nuri (d. 907), who spoke of being a lover (*'ashiq*) of God and felt a love so overwhelming that the orthodox considered him likely to be tempted to commit blameworthy acts. To defend himself against those who objected that a self-sufficient entity couldn't feel the sort of longing implied by passionate love (*'ishq*), Nuri stated that the lover is kept at a distance from God.⁶⁴ This passionate love was taken to its logical conclusion, namely the union for which passion longs, by Nuri's contemporary Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922).

Rabi`a seems to have loved a God who was an other, a being who created her and yet was distinct from her. al-Hallaj, though, often has been interpreted as loving a God who was identical with himself. Inspired by Qur'anic verses such as "He who hath given thee the Qur'an for a law will surely bring thee back home again," (28:85), al-Hallaj wrote: "I have become the One I love, and the One I love has become me! We are two spirits infused in a (single) body."⁶⁵ This sense of *tawhid*, of a complete unification of the lover and the beloved, led al-Hallaj to speak of God in very amorous terms. al-Hallaj's biographer Louis Massignon, in describing his ideas of mystical ontology, wrote that, for al-Hallaj, divine union is consummated in "the amorous nuptial in which the Creator ultimately rejoins his creature ...and in which the latter opens his heart to his Beloved in intimate, familiar" discourse.⁶⁶

According to Massignon, al-Hallaj's writings represented a marked distinction from other, non-religious poetry of the time. The ideal of Baghdadian high society at the time, he states, was the search for ecstasy, often inspired by what he terms *femmes de luxe*, women who were "professional idols of beauty" who functioned "to stimulate people's desire for aesthetic diversion." The presence of human beauty could be used to inspire an awareness of divine beauty, as if one's attraction to the human object could intentionally be shunted to, or transmuted

63 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 60.

64 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 137.

65 Quoted in Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, vol. 3: *The Teaching of al-Hallaj* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 43.

66 Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (abridged version) (Princeton University Press, 1994), 135.

into, an attraction to the divine object.⁶⁷ al-Hallaj would at times speak of the relationship between the mystic and God as being like that between lovers. For example, in clarifying what he does and does not mean by *tawhid*, al-Hallaj portrays God as playing some kind of lover's game, in which God presents the mystic with a series of veils that must be lifted, one by one.⁶⁸ This seemingly is for the sake of titillating the mystic and tricking him into being attracted to a Godself which the mystic rationally understands must ultimately remain inaccessible. However, al-Hallaj distanced himself from any erotic trend: in no place does he use imagery that could be misconstrued as referring to human sexuality. "The mystery of loving union," writes Schimmel, "is celebrated in verses free of any trace of the symbolism of profane love."⁶⁹

al-Hallaj's care in not to using profane imagery seems not to have saved him from the misunderstandings of the orthodox. Massignon writes that one of the three main reasons he was executed was for his crime of *zandaqa*, which Massignon translates as the "thesis of divine love."⁷⁰ The figure of al-Hallaj was quite fresh in the mind of a mystic who followed him by two centuries, Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111). In many ways al-Hallaj made mysticism quite suspect in the eyes of much of the Muslim community, a status al-Ghazzali was determined to rectify. And he succeeded: he is regarded not only as the reconciler of orthodoxy and the heterodox Sufism, but has even been called "the greatest Muslim after Muhammad."⁷¹ His influence in Islam seems in many ways to be analogous to that of Augustine's in Christianity. Their similarity is especially marked in their approaches to the interface between sexuality and mysticism.

al-Ghazzali, like Augustine, was emphatic about the good of sexuality and marriage when practiced in their proper ways, and the evil of both when misused. He writes: "Know that marriage is one part of the way of religion, like eating food... God created the womb. He created the organ of intercourse... No intelligent person will miss what God means by this." The structure of marriage as created by God has another necessary component: desire. "God created appetite as a deputy responsible for encouraging people to marry." However, it was clear to al-Ghazzali that human desires often become ends in themselves. "Marriage was made permissible for this reason [procreation], not for the sake of satisfying one's appetites."⁷² The love of God,

67 Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 139. Massignon says that the focus of the profane love was often another male, but he seems to want not to call attention to this: he uses the word "uranism," which is itself an archaic form of another term already obsolete in his time, "Urningism," = homosexuality.

68 Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, vol. 3, 49.

69 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 65. Cf. also Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 220.

70 Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 148.

71 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 91.

72 Quoted in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 172f.

which al-Ghazzali calls “the highest of all topics,” belongs in a position superior to any and all other forms of love. If this love does not “conquer a man’s heart and possess it wholly,” or at least “predominate in the heart over the love of all other things,” then the mystic is in “spiritual danger.”⁷³

al-Ghazzali’s perspective of sexual themes in mysticism comes out most clearly in his discussions of mystical union and the manifold misunderstandings of it. He was well aware of the tendency to use erotic imagery as metaphors for divine love. He does not dismiss this theme, but rather cautions clearly that one not misunderstand the intent:

As regards the erotic poetry which is recited in Sufi gatherings, and to which people sometimes make objection, we must remember that, when in such poetry mention is made of separation from or union with the beloved, the Sufi, who is an adept in the love of God applies such expressions to separation from or union with him.⁷⁴

al-Ghazzali is here defending mysticism against the complaints of those who, believing all Sufis to be as heterodox as al-Hallaj, objected to discussions of union with God. This comes out quite clearly in his epilogue to the *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, where he exhaustively explains what al-Hallaj might and might not have meant by declaring his soul and God’s to be united. al-Ghazzali manages to criticize al-Hallaj without actually disagreeing with him. He concludes that al-Hallaj had not been blasphemous, but rather only unwise in proclaiming a mystical truth that could be misleading to the uninitiated.⁷⁵ In his *Deliverance from Error* he explains that the fault lies, not in the attempt to attain this union, but in describing it incorrectly. The mystics reach a “higher stage” where, instead of beholding visions, “they come to stages in the ‘way’ which it is hard to describe in language; if a man attempts to express these, his words inevitably contain what is erroneous.” What these mystics really achieve, he says, is “nearness” (*qurb*). They may call it inherence (*hulul*), union (*ittihad*), or connection (*wusul*), but these are all erroneous.⁷⁶ There is a certain ambivalence in al-Ghazzali’s defense of al-Hallaj: one gets the impression that, though he consistently denounces al-Hallaj as unwise and in error, yet he privately does not reject al-Hallaj’s claims.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about al-Ghazzali’s feelings on the use of sensuousity and erotic imagery, for there appears to be an ambivalence between his exoteric philosophy and what seem to be his personal beliefs. For example, he explains that music and dancing can

73 al-Ghazzālī, *Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field (London: M. E. Sharpe. Inc., 1991), 79.

74 al-Ghazzālī, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 61.

75 Armstrong, *A History of God*, 229.

76 al-Ghazzālī, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazzālī*, trans. William Montgomery Watt (Oxford: OneWorld), 64.

induce states of ecstasy that “fan into flame whatever love is dormant in the heart, whether it be earthly and sensual, or divine and spiritual.” If the love in one’s heart is true, then “it is perfectly lawful, nay, laudable in [sic] him to take part in exercises which promote it,” but “if his heart is full of sensual desires, music and dancing will only increase them and are therefore unlawful.”⁷⁷ Later, he explicitly links Qur’anic recitation and erotic poetry as both being valid ways “to stir the emotions.”⁷⁸ It is likely that this seeming ambiguity is caused by the fact that some of his texts were written for the uninitiated public and others for his inner circle of followers, and his explanations differ accordingly depending on whom he is addressing. The resolution is simply that the worldly appetites, for al-Ghazzali, are admirable if motivated by the proper form of love—“the senses were created to spy for the intellect. They were to be its snare through which it might know the wonders of God’s handiwork”—and blameworthy if motivated by worldly satisfactions only—“the pig is appetite... through covetousness the pig invites to indecency and abomination.”⁷⁹

Moving on to the thirteenth century C.E., there are two figures who must be discussed together. Though the philosophies of the Egyptian poet `Umar Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235) and the Spanish theosophist Muhiyuddin Muhammad Ibn al-`Arabi (d. 1240) are quite dissimilar, they share similarities besides mere contemporaneity: each has attracted the fascination of Westerners to a great extent, and, more pertinent, each uses allegories of the erotic to an extent unmatched by almost any other Muslim mystic.

Ibn al-Farid is, after al-Hallaj, the mystical poet of the Arabic language who has attracted the most attention by Orientalists. Indeed, R. A. Nicholson devotes a full third of *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, the first major work on Sufism in English, to “The Odes of Ibn al-Farid.”⁸⁰ In his odes, which Schimmel says “unquestionably form the climax of classical Arabic mystical verse,”⁸¹ he sings some of the most direct and romantically heartfelt love poetry to be found in the whole of Sufism.

The earliest source within Islamic history of the erotic poem is, as mentioned above, the prelude to the *qasida*, the subject of which was the poet’s earthly love, his celebration of her beauty, his longings for her, and a mourning of her absence. As we have seen, the early Sufi expressions of love tended to focus on a love that was spiritual only, even though the uninitiated often misunderstood it to be a naturalistic one. Ibn al-Farid’s writings bridged the two extremes of chaste and sensual love, and this is perhaps a part of the reason that they achieved such

77 al-Ghazzālī, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 57f.

78 al-Ghazzālī, *Alchemy of Happiness*, 63.

79 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 243 and 259, respectively.

80 Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 162-266.

81 Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 5.

popularity: both the mystic and the worldly person could find meaning and aesthetic pleasure in his poetry. His *Ta'yyatu'l-kubra*, or “Lesser Ode rhyming in ‘T’,” is often considered the greatest example in Sufi literature of such love poetry. It can be read both as a mystical text and as a celebration of earthly courtship. It is likely, though, that the intent of the author was to glorify the divine, not the earthly, lover. As Schimmel points out, “the greatest mistake we can make” in interpreting this poetry is to assume that the poets are “liberties and wild, love-intoxicated characters who had nothing to do but sing about beautiful girls or boys and about very worldly pleasures in the wine-house.”⁸² This interpretation of the *Ta'yyatu'l-kubra* is suggested by the fact that Ibn al-Farid once said that “Had I wished, I could have written two volumes of commentary on every verse of it.”⁸³ Though the “common person” may have read his verses simply as love poetry, many of his fellow mystics shared his understanding of the work. Ibn al-Farid’s commentator Nabalusi explained that

in every erotic description, whether the subject thereof be male or female, and in all imagery of gardens, flowers, rivers, birds and the like [Ibn al-Farid] refers to the Divine Reality manifested in phenomena, and not to those phenomena themselves.

The lengthy *Ta'yyatu'l-kubra* (761 verses) uses the device of a running narrative interspersed with dialogue to describe the phases of mystical experience through which one passes in attaining oneness with God, and describes the nature of that oneness. Unlike many other examples of esoteric discourse, Nicholson feels that Ibn al-Farid’s symbolism was not so much a mask used to hide what would be dangerous to express in plain speech, but rather was the only possible means of imparting mystical truth.⁸⁴ I will summarize some of the basic elements of the poem. (Since I will need to shorten the poem considerably, I will present it in a summarized form. Some of this is paraphrase, but most of it is a condensing of Nicholson’s verses without the disruptive ellipses (...). The partite analysis of the text is also largely Nicholson’s.)

The poem opens in a way reminiscent of the *jahiliyya* poetry: the narrator complains of his sufferings in the path of seeking his beloved, his loneliness, and his longing to be with her.

I drank love’s strong wine, and when my sobriety was ended, I sought union with her [my beloved]. And I said, from my state of ardent love and suffering, “bestow on my your glance. I feel a passion that only tears betrayed. Anguish hath sorely oppressed me, and emaciation hath laid bare the secret of my true being. But thy beauty ordained that I should endure, for when one is ensnared by Beauty,

82 Annemarie Schimmel, “Sufi Literature” (special paper based on a lecture given in New York City in 1975. Published by the Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, 1975.), 3.

83 Quoted in Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 169.

84 Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 193.

methinks his soul even from the most delicious life is gladly rendered up to death. I swear by the firm pact of love between us that thou art the desire of my heart and the end of my search. Everything in thee is the source of my fascination, and I never was bewildered until I chose love of thee as a religion. (verses 1-83)

The Beloved answers him, saying that he is insincere and presumptuous. He is not really in love with her, but just with himself.

Another's love hast thou sought and hast taken the wrong path. To those who are rightly guided the straight road unto me is plain, but all men are made blind by their desires. Cease, then, pretending to love, and shun the quarter of union: 'tis far off, and was never reached in life, and lo, thou art living. If thou art sincere, die! Such is Love. (84-102)

The poet objects that, no, such a death is his truest wish, for it is through such a debasing that true honor lies: "By my life, though I lose my life in exchange for her love, I am the gainer; and if she wastes away my heart, she will make it whole once more." (121) He now turns to his audience, and explains that this beloved has truly become the focus of his spirituality.

'Tis my being crazed with love of her that makes me jealous of her, and my spirit is rapt in ecstatic joy towards her. Whilst I prayed mine eye was seeing her in front of me, and to her I address my prayers. (144-152)

Yet, in a way very reminiscent of al-Hallaj, the Lover and the Beloved are one.

Both of us are a single worshipper who, in respect of the united state, bows himself to his essence in every act of bowing. And I saw that I was indubitably she whom I loved, and that for this reason my self had referred me to myself. (153-163)

What Ibn al-Farid means by this union is not the ontological *tawhid* of which al-Hallaj was accused, but rather an *ec-stasy*, a forgetting of oneself. It seems as if the discontiguous selves have now attained a state of marriage, from which they work as a team.

I sought to approach her by sacrificing myself, and she drew me nigh. And with entire disinterestedness I put behind me any regard for myself. Through her, not through myself, I began to guide unto her those who by themselves had lost the right ways; and 'twas she that really guided them. (168-174)

Now the poet begins to explain as well as he can just what the nature of this union is. It seems as though he is trying to explain *baqa'*, or subsistence, the state which follows the above *fana'*, extinction.

I had been enamored of her, but when I renounced my desire, she desired me for herself and loved me. And I became a beloved, nay, one loving himself. Through her I went forth from myself to her and came not back to myself. In the sobriety after self-effacement I was none other than she, and when she unveiled herself my attributes became hers and we are one. (204-215)

After more discussion of the nature of this union, al-Farid seems to explain that God manifests himself in beautiful forms for the sake of tricking humans into following this, the right path.

The charm of every fair youth or lovely woman is lent to them from Her beauty. It was only because she clothed herself in the form of beautiful phenomena, and her lovers supposed that these phenomena were other than she, that they loved her. Every lover, I am he, and She is every lover's beloved, and all lovers and loved are but names of a vesture. (242-264)

Ibn al-Farid continues his exposition of *ittihad*, emphasizing the importance of not abandoning the *shari'ah*, the path of law, in favor of the mystical quest. He then pauses to offer a fifty-two verse eulogy of his beloved and her beauty. (Unfortunately, though Nicholson describes this section as a "beautiful lyric interlude," he doesn't translate it here.) The poet returns to the topic with a fascinating presentation and celebration of the physical senses as vehicles for divine awareness.

Let me tell thee the mystery of that which my soul received secretly from my five external senses and communicated to my inward senses. My thought beholds the Beloved with the eye of my phantasy, and I wonder at my drunkenness without wine, and am thrilled in the depths of my being by a joy that comes from myself, and my heart dances, and my spirit is my musician. Every organ of sense unites me with Her, and my union includes every root of my hair. (409-417)

The remainder of the poem deals largely with points of doctrine, such as the unreality of metempsychosis and the importance of faith, and more discussions of the nature of reality.

I wish to draw attention to three specific aspects of the *Ta'yyatu'l-kubr* which are important to Sufism. One of the most unusual facets of this poem is the tone of worldliness with which the poet speaks in places, and the physical nature of the symbols he employs. Not only does he cast the mystical drama in human terms, but he even celebrates the human senses and shows that they can act as conduits for transcendent awakening. Throughout the entire poem he uses physical symbols such as clothing and veils, dressing and undressing, hiding and veiling, the comeliness of faces, and the prehension of the transcendent Beloved with the physical senses. Second, al-Farid's use of the feminine pronoun, *hiya / ha*, must be pointed out. It would be

improper, from an objective standpoint, to connect the theme of the erotic with the use of feminine imagery, for that would reduce the interpreter to a standpoint of androcentric chauvinism. It must be acknowledged, though, that his audience, both then and now, was and is likely to interpret the text in such a way; that is, to see it as erotic if but for no reason other than that the motifs are feminine. This is largely because such motifs are unusual. The use of feminine symbols less usual than the use of masculine imagery, because masculine imagery, e.g. God as He and the poet a man, is the norm. The feminine pronoun immediately calls attention to itself, especially if that pronoun refers in places to God. One might remark that there is a considerable amount of mystical Arabic poetry which employs *hiya* and *ha*, but in the vast majority of these instances the pronoun refers to a grammatically feminine object, such as *nafs*, the soul. Its application to God, though, is not one motivated by grammatical necessity. A third important aspect is the dramatic element of this poem. Though it is not a dialogue proper, since the Beloved only speaks once (verses 84-102), there is much indirect dialogical activity. For example, the poet's "confidant" speaks to the poet in verses 24-25, though it is nonverbal speech, rather a kind of direct intuition into the poet's mind, "as though the Recording Angels had come down" (verse 25). There are also a few places where the poet seems to be addressing the reader. This dialogue gives the effect of reinforcing the theme of personal interaction between the lover and the beloved, culminating not only in their union but also in their acting as one, almost as a married couple.

Ibn al-'Arabi uses gender imagery in a similar way as does al-Farid—both envision a dialogue between the soul and God through the analogy of a dialogue between a male lover and a female beloved. However, unlike the poet al-Farid, Ibn al-'Arabi is a philosopher. He greatly expands this imagery beyond mere poesis and makes of it an ontological explanation of the cosmos and a soteriological explanation of encounter with God. In fine, he "sexualizes" the cosmos.

I will examine the theme of sexual mysticism in the thought of Ibn al-'Arabi in two parts. I will present first his involvement with themes of the erotic in the worldly plane, and then their impact on his mystical philosophy.

Two types of human relationships motivated Ibn al-'Arabi to value highly the relationship between human lovers, and especially women: the fondness the Prophet felt for women, and a decisive meeting al-'Arabi himself had with a young woman. There is a famous hadith in which Muhammad states that he was given by God a love for perfumes and women and joy in prayer. Ibn al-'Arabi makes extensive use of this hadith in the final chapter of his *Bezels of Wisdom*, where he bases much of his reverence for women on this proclivity of Muhammad. Further, he hypothesizes that Muhammad did not merely feel an attraction to women, but even pointedly drew attention to the general concept of femininity in a few specific locutions of

grammar. “Then the Apostle goes on to give precedence to the feminine over the masculine, intending to convey thereby a special concern with and experience of women.” This is remarkable, he explains, because “the Arabs usually make the masculine gender prevail.”⁸⁵ Lest one be tempted to interpret this fondness as an emotional one only, al-`Arabi goes on to explain that Muhammad also loved “the aromas of generation in women, the most delightful of perfumes being [experienced] within the embrace of the beloved.”⁸⁶ Since the Prophet is the model of perfection for all humanity, he concludes, “love for [women] is obligatory.”⁸⁷

Ibn al-`Arabi also had one encounter with a woman that, though Merkur states was imaginal only, seems to have been particularly influential on his thought. A shaykh had a daughter, “a particularly lissome young girl,” and al-`Arabi states that he “observed with care the noble endowments that graced her person.” He “took her as a model for the poems in the present book, which are love poems.” She became a conscious inspiration for much of his work, for he soon says “whatever name I may mention in this work, it is to her that I am alluding.”⁸⁸ This sensual attraction al-`Arabi felt for women was not merely confined to his imaginal visions, for he elsewhere celebrates physical intercourse. “When a man loves a woman, he seeks union with her, that is to say the most complete union possible in love, and there is in the elemental sphere no greater union than that between the sexes.”⁸⁹

The high status in which al-`Arabi places physical charms and sex should not be interpreted to mean that his interests were lascivious. On the contrary, his intention is tantric; that is, he elevates sex to a spiritual practice and goes so far as to found, if implicitly, his entire cosmology on the model of sexuality. The Islamicist Sachiko Murata writes that “[i]t should not be imagined that Ibn al-`Arabi is prescribing sexual activity as a means of achieving spiritual realization,”⁹⁰ but in many places it does seem that he is doing exactly that. First, and most simply, he venerates the procreative function of sex. “The relation of woman with man is that of Nature with the Soul. Woman is the medium through which children appear just as Nature is the medium through which bodies appear.” Yet he is not simply stating the obvious, for he immediately follows this observation with the statement that “There can be no Soul without Nature and no nature without Soul.”⁹¹ Immediately following the above discussion of the “delightful aromas” of the woman’s body during intercourse,⁹² he cites the Qur’an 24:26,

85 Ibn al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 277.

86 al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 277.

87 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 186.

88 Quoted in Merkur, *Gnosis*, 233.

89 al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 274.

90 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 185.

91 Quoted in Merkur, *Gnosis*, 232.

92 Since I don’t have the original Arabic of this text, I must assume that “aromas of generation in women,” the “most delightful of perfumes,” means exactly what it sounds like.

interpreting *tayyib* to mean, not “good” as normally translated, but “sweet-smelling,”⁹³ thus giving the meaning as “sweet-smelling women (*tayyibat*) are for sweet-smelling men.”⁹⁴ However, it is in the mystical interpretation of sexuality that this “prescription” becomes most clear.

Regarding the above-mentioned young woman, Ibn al-`Arabi wrote that any names in that book were to be taken as reference to hers. His mystical interpretation of sex is the converse of this: references to physical union or to the human female are to be taken as references to mystical union or to the divine female. The reason for this is that, in al-`Arabi’s philosophy, all divine attributes are by necessity manifested in, and nonexistent without, worldly loci of reflection of these attributes. He criticizes the opposing argument by reference to al-Ghazzali, who “asserted that God can be known without any reference to the created cosmos,” concluding that this is mistaken.⁹⁵ God’s attributes cannot truly be known, either by humans or by God, apart from their manifestation. The most perfect locus of divine attributes in the created spheres is, for Islam, the human being. For al-`Arabi, then, it is in the human that the mystic can see God most fully. He is not, however, referring to just any type of human. Ibn al-`Arabi claims that it is specifically women who are the most perfect mirror for God. It should seem as though this is al-`Arabi’s personal preference as a man, and that he is mistaken in elevating it to a universal truth. That is to say, why, for a heterosexual woman, should not a man be the most perfect form of witnessing? He does admit that, up to a point, this is true. His exegete Dawud Qaysari (d. 1350) explains it as follows. The essences of women require that they be loved by men, and the essences of men require that they be loved by women. “The man is loved and desired by the woman,” and the woman is loved and desired by the man. “Each of them brings together the attribute of being the lover and the beloved,” so that “each of them is lover from one point of view and beloved from another point of view.” As this activity is all a reflection of divinity, “love sets up the interrelationship between the Real and the creature,” Qaysari concludes.⁹⁶ Yet al-`Arabi persists in elevating the mirror of the feminine over the mirror of the masculine. Some reasons he gives for this are the Prophet’s careful manipulation of grammatical gender, as mentioned above. He also emphasizes quite often what he sees to be the *essentially* feminine nature of words that are simply *grammatically* feminine, such as *nafs*, “soul,” *`illa*, “cause [of the cosmos],” and especially *dhat*, “essence [of God].”

93 Cf. Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 578.

94 al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 278.

95 al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 93. This may be clarified by reference to the distinction between Plato and Aristotle on the metaphysics of universalisms. Plato posited that the ultimate reality consists of absolutely attenuated Forms, whose existence is not contingent on their particular manifestation. E.g., the Form of Beauty will exist whether or not there is anything in the reified spheres which is Beautiful. Aristotle, by contrast, held that the universal, e.g. the category “Beauty,” could only be said to exist if it were manifested in the particular, e.g. “a beautiful thing.”

96 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 196.

More than these language games, al-`Arabi finds what are, to him, transcendent metaphysical reasons that femininity is a more perfect mirror than masculinity. Like Taoism, he declares the universe to be created by and ontologically founded upon a metaphysical dualism of gender; he draws the classic distinction that the feminine represents receptivity and the masculine represents activity. Yet, unlike Taoism, al-`Arabi tends to prioritize the feminine aspect of “Nature.” Since God is the origin of the attributes which are reflected in the created world, Nature can be seen as receiving these attributes and thus, though She comprises equally both male and female energies, it is the receiving feminine that has the most direct tie with the Creator. She is, as William Chittick puts it, the receptivity that allows the existent things to become manifest.⁹⁷ Ibn al-`Arabi’s cosmology thus becomes doubly feminine—not only is Nature feminine in the sense of reflecting God’s attributes and receiving God’s creative impulse, but also She “imparturates,” if I may coin the term, this creative impulse and becomes the mother of all things.⁹⁸ Ibn al-`Arabi summarizes this philosophy as follows: “Nature in relation to the Real is like the female in relation to the male, since within it becomes manifest engendering, i.e. the engendering of everything other than God... Nature is the highest, greatest mother of the cosmos.”⁹⁹

As might be evident, the depth of al-`Arabi’s thought on the interrelationship of the erotic, sexuality, and divinity is vast. I conclude with two observations. First, it is important to keep in mind that he was aware that this philosophy of sexuality could seem heterodox. His sexual cosmology was certainly intended for an initiated audience only. For the average person who does not have the intellectual insight to understand this philosophy and the necessary control of his or her desires, “the marriage act becomes a form without spirit,” an expression merely of the animal appetite.¹⁰⁰ He whose love for women “is limited to natural lust lacks [all] true knowledge” of divine love.¹⁰¹ Second, one must not forget that al-`Arabi was, first and foremost, a mystic. “The gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about [God],” he says.¹⁰² His primary intent was not to eulogize creation, nor to philosophize about it, but to experience the divine presence—hence the importance of experiencing and understanding what he calls God’s greatest self-disclosure: sexual union. As Murata puts it, sex “incarnates God’s desire for creation and His joy in bringing the world into existence,” in that the human appetite is a manifestation of God’s attribute of desire and love.¹⁰³ The feminine and

97 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-`Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 140.

98 One is reminded of the origin of “matter” in L. *máter*, “mother.”

99 Quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 141.

100 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 195 and 188, respectively.

101 al-`Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 276.

102 Quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 181.

103 Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 186f.

the erotic can be means by which the mystic is motivated to seek God. To summarize from the *Bezels of Wisdom*, “[The mystic’s] contemplation of the Reality in woman is the most complete and perfect, because in this way he contemplates the Reality in both active and passive mode,”¹⁰⁴ and thus human beauty becomes the means by which the mystic recognizes the divine and, ultimately, attains the true union of which sexual union is but a reflection.

I finish my survey of Sufi themes with the one name most well-known to the Western world: Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi al-Balkhi (d. 1273). Rumi is known as the most prolific writer of love poetry in the Muslim world, and he, too, often speaks of love as being the main force animating his life and spirit: “’Tis the flame of Love that fired me, ’Tis the wine of Love inspired me.”¹⁰⁵ However, I have found little erotic love from his pen.

There is a certain polarity within Rumi’s writings. On the one hand, his life and his thought were filled with the experience of love. He had a relationship with Shamsuddin Tabrizi, who seems to have been both his shaykh and his friend and peer. They were so close that at certain meetings they would embrace each other and fall at each other’s feet, so in love with each other “that one did not know who was lover and who was beloved.”¹⁰⁶ Rumi sings of his love of Shamsuddin in verses which Schimmel describes as being so full of love, longing, happiness, and despair that they “have never been surpassed in their sincerity.”¹⁰⁷ In places he speaks of what could be seen as human love in quite positive terms: “May these vows and this marriage be blessed. May it be sweet milk, this marriage, like wine and halvah... May this marriage be full of laughter, our every day a day in paradise.”¹⁰⁸ However, the love to which Rumi refers is a very austere one. His verses about the tender, warm aspect of love are comparatively rare, writes Schimmel. Instead, Rumi preferred to speak of love as being only for the strong and those willing to suffer.¹⁰⁹ When Rumi does speak of human relations, his overall tone seems to be too negative to refer to it as “erotic.” “The fire of sensuality pulls us to hell,” he writes. “Its remedy [is] “the light of religion... The sensuality of sex drags you back.”¹¹⁰ Elsewhere he implies that he is denouncing, not just animal desires of the sort that al-Ghazzali condemns, but rather that he is warning against any sensuous desire inspired by the earthly realm: “He who craves sensuality is polluted, he who craves the intellect is pure.”¹¹¹ Rumi emphasizes this emotional asceticism in his praise of the angels. He points out that, in some Islamic theology, the animals are ruled by

104 al-‘Arabí, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 275.

105 Quoted in Friedlander 55.

106 Quoted in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 313.

107 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 314.

108 From Kulliyat-i-Shams 2667, from www.armory.com/%7Eethrace/ev/siir/. Source anonymous.

109 Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 121.

110 Quoted in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 88.

111 Quoted in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 188.

sensuality whereas the angels, ruled by intellect, are entirely devoid of any sensuous motivation. Humanity, though, is composed of half of each, and the mystic's goal is thus to rid himself of any and all sensual impulses and foster only the intellectual.

This negative trend becomes even more pronounced in Rumi's depictions of women:

Alas for those whose intellects are feminine and whose ugly souls are masculine and prepared... Happy are those whose intellects are masculine and whose ugly souls are feminine and helpless... Animal qualities prevail in "women," because they tend toward color and scent. When the ass perceived the colour and scent of the pasture, all arguments fled from its nature.¹¹²

While Murata points out that we are not to interpret these references as referring literally to women, quoting in support Rumi's statement "When the Prophet said, 'Put the females behind,' he meant your soul,"¹¹³ the fact remains that Rumi's depictions both of femininity and of human love in general often come across as rather severe.

Rumi, without a doubt, was a master exponent of divine love. Love was not only one of the most transformative experiences of his life, but was, for him, both the energizing force of the universe—"If the sun were not in love, in his beauty would be no light, and if earth and mountain were not lovers, grass would not grow out of their breasts"—and also the most dynamic—"love makes the ocean boil like a kettle."¹¹⁴ However, his writing so often contains images that are downright crass that one is not left with the impression that Rumi celebrates anything erotic.

5. CONCLUSION

With the famous Rumi I conclude my brief survey of themes of the erotic in Sufism. Certainly, the discussion is not complete. No exposition of love and the sensuous in Islamic mysticism could be anything but incomplete without at least a mention of Bayezid Bistami, Sana'i, Suhrawardi Maqtul, Fariduddin `Attar, Hafiz, and many others. However, the above discussions have covered the major figures associated with the theme: Rabi`a and al-Hallaj are in many ways the poetic founders of love and divine passion; al-Ghazzali and Rumi two of the most famous exponents of love, even if not ones who emphasized the erotic; and Ibn al-Farid and Ibn al-`Arabi the authors of some of the most sensuous and even sensual writing in all of Sufism.

112 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 317.

113 Quoted in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 317.

114 Quoted in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 293.

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