

**“Universal Love”: the case for a psychology of love in Sufism**  
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*Understanding of universal love in the context of the Sufi belief system*

To open the discourse, I will admit two things: First, I am neither a psychologist of religion nor am I qualified to offer any ‘in-house’ psychological reading of Sufism. Secondly, I want you to unequivocally rest assured that there is no such thing as ‘universal love’ within the history of Sufism. It is a totally constructed notion of the modern period, and it is a notion connected to the rise of various spiritualisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Having said this, it is not as though one can’t find aspects of such an idea in Sufi literature if one goes looking for it.

Much of what Sufism represents is best described as how Sufis have read and interpreted the religion of Islam. Sufism is a mystical tradition that is firmly grounded in the Islamic religion. It emerges out of a need for non-rational or experiential expressions of the faith in the face of a growing rationalisation and formalisation of religion in the period 900-1100. So it is the esoteric response to an exoteric stance on faith.

Sufism worked for so many people initially, in the medieval period, and even today, for both Muslims and non-Muslims who admire the philosophy of Sufism. This is because “Islam” is itself a religion that is in continuous flow and development, and its interpretation is something ongoing and in the hands of those who practise the faith.

Sufis have historically interpreted “Islam” through the lens of love and have exposed the inherent universality of its faith.

If we go in search of “universal love” within Sufi literature, the first thing that is important for us to grasp is that Islam, like Christianity before it, is a universal faith, with a view to sharing its beliefs with all humankind. And throughout the centuries, since its beginning, Islam has expanded the boundaries of its belief to incorporate the widest possible scope of interpretation so as to be inclusive of the wide variety of peoples encountered along the way.

The concept of “universal love”, if we are to talk about it, is therefore not specific to Sufism, but grounded in the very fundamental principles of Islamic doctrine and practice. On an even broader scale, one has to understand that the idea of love itself is really a universal phenomenon, since it can be located in the larger scheme of human experience. This is not to say that we have reached ‘universal love’, but rather that love is in its application a universal human experience. I think these are two very distinct things.

So I want to make a clear separation between ‘universal love’ which represents an idea of unconditional compassion for all, and ‘love’ as a universally

experienced emotion. I want to be clear about this, because Sufi literature does not explicitly talk about 'universal love', but about the universality of the experience of love as a transformative experience, and one that is central to the Sufi path.

In Sufism, the seed of this idea is nurtured in the works of a variety of Sufi authors, most famous of which is Rumi. In fact, his magnum opus, the *Mathnawi*, offers a curious impasse in the way that love is understood. Rumi's spiritual advice is on the one hand impersonal and pluralistic; while on the other hand, his own experience of love through his mentor is intensely personal and singular.

It is tempting when reading Rumi to rush to the conclusion that there is a 'universal love' at play. Especially when reading Rumi in translation. Rumi's poetry seems to suggest that 'universal love' is found in the marriage of two ideas: unity of being (*tawhid*) and transformative love (*eshq*). Rumi was a highly educated individual and a learned and respected Sunni Muslim scholar. He was also a mystical poet and toward the end of his life a *majnoun* (crazy lover) who wrote some of the most sublime lines of poetry ever known. So powerful was his writing that the *Mathnawi* was only two centuries later described as *the Qur'an in Persian*. But when it comes right down to it, Rumi was a Muslim. And he held Islam to be the most perfect manifestation of God's religion. So while he was inclusive in his definition of religion in welcoming all faiths to the 'temple of love', it is really in order that they may be perfected in Allah's love for all mankind. This whole business of a universal religion, as propagated by Sufism, is a 20<sup>th</sup> century creation introduced to the West via India in connection with the rise of "Guruism" (I don't have a better word for it at the moment) in that same period.

In fact, the first form of Sufism to reach the West was through an Indian Sufi saint and musician, Hazrat Inayat Khan. It is Inayat Khan who develops the philosophy of 'universal Sufism' based on the Chishti Sufi practise of love, tolerance and openness toward all faiths. The Chishti Sufi order is one of the oldest, and its philosophy does represent a *Rumiesque* Sufi approach in that it is open to all but welcomes all to witness the perfection of Islam. It is also important to bear in mind the influence of social dynamics on religious attitude. It is no surprise, for instance, that Rumi, Ibn al-Arabi, and Hazrat Inayat Khan were all partial to a universalistic religious experience, since they were natives of places that have for centuries experienced religious diversity: such as Anatolia (modern day Turkey, where Rumi lived), Southern Spain, or India. The outcome of a pluralistic religious philosophy, we need to appreciate, is the direct result of the experience of diversity of religious and cultural expression in specific geographical regions.

Let us return to the two ideas: *tawhid* and *eshq*. If we follow this to conclusion, we can say that Sufis were astute observers of the inner world of religion. That is, they were keen students (and some masters) of the internal workings of human emotional and mental states. And much like the tremendous achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychoanalysts, Freud and Jung, through sheer power of insight,

Sufis of the medieval period were able to describe, quite accurately, the internal world of human experience through allegory and metaphor.

I think we have reached the crux of the issue here. Prior to the rise of modern scientific enquiry, Sufis were able to detect certain 'universal' experiences and apply this understanding to developing an elaborate psychological system. This system was encased in a mystical symbolic language, but central to this system was a psychology of love.

\*As an aside, these psychological systems were termed 'subtle body systems' in Sufi literature. I have made a small contribution toward outlining the history and development of the subtle body systems in Sufism in a book chapter in an edited volume *Religion and the subtle body in Asia and the West*.

*Understanding of the development of Sufi psychology with specific reference to the practice of universal love*

From about the 9<sup>th</sup> century onward, in the Persian-speaking world, Sufis began to make use of the term *eshq*. If you remember, I have used the translation 'transformative love' for this term. It's a good translation, amongst many offered in the past, since it fits perfectly with the practical way *eshq* has been incorporated by the Sufis. So within the Sufi system, love plays a transformative role. It is the secret formula or the alchemical component. Rumi confesses this early on in his *Mathnawi*, which is a 6-volume work that at its core deals with the transformation of the self through love.

If you remember, we also mentioned the peculiar impasse with Rumi. How is it that Rumi speaks about the universality of religion, but love remains an intensely individual experience? Rumi offers several answers in his own work to explain this. One of them is that he uses the metaphor of the cook boiling the vegetables in the pot to demonstrate love as the "heat" and "pressure" that brings the "rawness" of a person to spiritual maturity. Once arrived, plurality is not hard to see using the new found vision of the transformed self.

But here is the peculiarity of love in Sufism. The experience of love in every example of Sufi literature is an intensely personal one, and it is singularly focused. The love that Rumi feels is not for all creation, but for his mentor Shams-e Tabrizi. While there is a generally perceived notion that love is somehow automatically compassion for all, this is simply not true. At least this is not true in the strict sense of the Sufi system. Sufis generally believe that love is a 'trap' for the ego. And in the Sufi system nothing works so well as the force of love in tearing the individual away from the possession of ego-consciousness and attachment to material nature.

Rumi says: "When love calls the heart to it, the heart flees from all creation".

To continue with my analysis, I am going to turn to the work of a contemporary Sufi master, the late Javad Nurbakhsh (1926-2008). Nurbakhsh spent a lifetime

outlining the psychology of Sufism and decoding the symbolism and the esoteric language of medieval Sufi literature. The culmination of his findings can be found in several books, but I will focus on one in particular: *The Psychology of Sufism*. In this work he continues the system as set out in Rumi's *Mathnawi*, and echoing Rumi's statement above, he says:

"Sufism is the apprehension of reality through the attraction of divine love".

Nurbakhsh makes the distinction between "unity" and "multiplicity" in his explanation. The commencement of the journey of self-transformation through love is marked by learning to distinguish between illusion and reality. The more that the individual becomes aware of reality, the closer they come to realising "unity of being". The world of multiplicity is the product of the illusions of the ego-self; the world of unity is achieved through the appreciation of reality through love.

Through this short analysis, it is possible to speak of 'universal love' though not in the sense that love is an all-encompassing compassionate state. But rather, and more specifically, we can say that Sufis presented love as the path to universal understanding. It was not that the individual experience of love was universal, but rather that love was a universally applicable human experience. More importantly, the point is how 'love' has functioned in the Sufi system. Love, as the Sufis understood it, functioned as a transformative force in order to extinguish the veil of ego-consciousness, and thereby permitting a vision of unity.

Now, I can think of no better example than that produced by Attar in the 12<sup>th</sup> century epic, *mantiq at-tayr* or "conference of the birds" to demonstrate the point at hand about our pursuit of universal love in Sufism.

In Attar's poetic tale, many thousands of birds set out to find the 'bird-king', but only 30 make the journey to where this King resides. The 'bird-king' is a metaphor for God, of course, but it is right at the end, with the play on words, that Attar gives us the answer to the birds' search for their King. In Persian, 'thirty' is *si*; and bird is *morgh*. The name of the 'bird-king' is the *Simorgh*. Now when the 30 birds are waiting to be introduced to their King, for whom they've travelled so long and so far on a perilous journey, they are told by their guide, the hoopoe, to look into the lake and behold the *Simorgh*. There is a great sense of candour in the way that Attar communicates the message of the text: universal love, if we are permitted to use this phrase, is the realisation of unity by the conscious mind of the individuals that otherwise normally exist in the realm of multiplicity and separation. This realisation is only made possible, we have to remember, by the journey of self-transformation that according to the Sufis is necessitated by love.

Recently, I had the good fortune to be introduced to the work of Robert A. Johnson. I found his use of the myth of Parsifal quite fascinating in that it provided an uncanny reflection of the wisdom within the Sufi poems. His rendition of the myth is that Parsifal has to come to realise that he needs to ask a

significant question. But Parsifal can't come to this realisation without having gone through the necessary toils encountered in his journey. Johnson's interpretation speaks to the healing and liberating power of the right question that needs to be asked at the right moment in our lives. For Parsifal, the question concerns the Grail. He has to ask 'who does the Grail serve'? Johnson aptly reads this as the condition of the modern man. Modern man does not ask the question, but is rather focused on the ego-self; the illusion that the "I" is at the centre of the universe. The 'question' is emphasis placed on the question is due to the fact that it is the question that can bring about the transformation necessary from the immature to the matured self. The Grail serves the Grail King, we are told, i.e., God or a higher principle, or in Jungian terms, the (fully realised and transformed) Self.

I want to end with a verse from Hafiz, a Persian mystical poet of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, who delivered the same message in just two lines of poetry:

*Faash meegooyam o az goftey-e khod del-shaadam*  
*Bande-ye eshqam o az har do jahaan azaadam*

"I speak openly and am pleased with what I say; I am the servant of love, and free from both the worlds".