

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE IN QUR'ĀN AND GOSPEL

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In the conclusion to his book *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye attempted to explain why he enjoyed reading the Bible as much as he did. The Canadian literary giant intimated that he did not like the Bible for the usual religious reasons. Why then was he attracted to the Bible? In the final chapter he posed the question, then digressed. Posed the question again, then digressed.

Finally, at the very end of his book, with only a page to spare, Frye was able to articulate his answer. The reason he liked to read the Bible so much, he wrote, was because “the language used in the Bible is, in short, the language of love.”¹

Certainly many readers of the Bible would describe their experience of the book's language in a similar way. However, they would not limit love in the scripture to its language alone. Rather, they find that the “language of love” is used to portray a whole range of qualities which characterize fulfilling relationships among God and people.

Yet, in spite of the acknowledgment of the special quality of love in the Bible, there is a tendency, especially in the west, to suggest that this same love will be found in the world's religions. One common expression is that ‘all the religions really boil down to love.’ There is a corresponding belief that wherever these religions have an important scripture, the affirmation that “God is love” would surely be a part of each, and each scripture would be full of divine commands to humans to love.

A test case for this assumption of the similarity of scriptures would be to compare the New Testament with the scripture of the Muslims, the Qur'ān. This comparison has much to recommend it. The two scriptures are roughly the same size. Both scriptures serve as locus of authority for their respective faith communities, and both are considered by those communities to be the Word of the Creator God.

A careful study of the Qur'ān and the New Testament reveals some significant differences between the concepts of love portrayed by these two influential scriptures. These differences extend ultimately to concepts of God as well. The

¹ Northrop FRYE, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 233.

purpose of comparison of scriptural content on the theme of love is to clarify the actual claims which are made in the scriptures at the heart of the respective faiths. Only when the claims are clearly expressed can there be meaningful reflection on them, or any kind of responsible evaluation.

This study will proceed into an examination of the language of love in the Qur'an and the Gospel. Careful attention to relevant vocabulary in the original languages is essential in this investigation. The method of word study followed below is common in biblical studies, but has not yet been taken full advantage of in the study of the Qur'an. The accumulation of lexicographical detail may seem tedious at points, but it is an important part of accounting for the texture of language and the impression which it leaves on readers. In addition to the vocabulary of love and its frequency, attention will be given to the contexts of these words in scripture, and to some of the ways in which these words have been understood in the interpretive traditions of the respective faiths. A large part of this paper will be devoted to scholarly analysis of, and theological reflection on, the material on love in the Qur'an.

1. The Language of Love in the Gospel

1.1. The love of God in the Gospel according to John

The theme of the love of God appears in the New Testament like splashes of colour on the growing portrait of Jesus which the writers are painting. One of many such splashes comes in a kind of leading statement, "God so loved the world that..." (John 3:16).² The verse is one of the best-known verses from the Gospel according to John, and for many Christians around the world it is the best-known verse of the entire Bible.

That such an innocent-sounding verse about the love of God—common on the lips of Sunday-school children around the world—should set up several striking contrasts between two great world faiths, is surely of interest to anyone who wants to understand the interplay of diverse religious commitments.³ It turns out that contrasts arise as soon as John begins to spell out the particular qualities of the divine love he is writing about. The formula "God loved the world so much that..." begs a completion of the thought. How much indeed does God love the world? "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever

² Unless otherwise noted, English translations from the Bible are those of the *New International Version* (International Bible Society, 1973).

³ Anders NYGREN wrote that John 3:16 is one of three New Testament texts which "have played an effective part in preserving for Agape its central position in Christianity." *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The verse signals in a very few words a number of particular qualities of God’s love in the Gospel: it is offered to humans who don’t deserve it; God shows his love by giving his own Son; the Son dies to save humanity; and this love is demonstrated in history in a tangible way.

(1) The Greek verb for “to love” in John 3:16 is *agapaō*. This verb occurs 143 times in the New Testament. In addition to this, the New Testament contains 116 occurrences of the matching noun for “love,” *agapē*, as well as 61 occurrences of a second term from the verb, *agapētos* (“beloved”). In the five books traditionally ascribed to John, *agapaō* occurs 58 times, with 31 of those occurrences in the Gospel according to John. *Agapē* appears in the five books another 24 times, five of those in the Gospel. A second verb for ‘to love,’ *phileō*, appears 25 times in the New Testament, with 13 of those occurrences in John.

John 3:16 offers the first appearance of the verb *agapaō* in John. The noun *agapē* first occurs at 5:42, where Jesus tells religious leaders who want to kill him that “you do not have the love of God in your hearts.” The verb seems to be especially concentrated in chapters 13-15 (16 occurrences). Uses of *agapaō* in John include love of the disciples for Jesus (14:15, 21); love of God the Father for God the Son (3:35; 10:17)⁴; love of God the Son for God the Father (14:31); love of Jesus for his disciples (13:23, 34), notably his love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus (11:5) and one particular disciple (19:26); and the love of the disciples for one another (13:34, 15:12). A key verse on the theme of love seems to be 13:1: “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” In the Gospel, the verb and noun are used freely for relationships in all directions. They are ‘mutual’ words, words which signify an experience of meaningful fellowship.⁵

(2) The object of God’s love in John 3:16 is the *kosmos*. In John’s thought system *kosmos* often means humanity in rebellion against God.⁶ This brings out a second special characteristic. God loves those who by their thoughts and actions

⁴ Also, significantly, John 17:23, 24, 26. Ethelbert STAUFFER wrote that “...John constantly speaks of the love of the Father for the Son. All love is concentrated on Him. He is wholly the Mediator of the love of God.” “Agapaō, agapē, agapētos,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard KITTEL, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. & ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. I, p. 52.

⁵ Cf. A. NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, pp. 67-75.

⁶ See, for example, Philip H. TOWNER, “Paradigms Lost: Mission to the *Kosmos* in John and in David Bosch’s Models of Mission,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995), pp. 108-110, 112-113. Cf. A. NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, p. 156.

do not deserve his love. In John, humanity is portrayed as making a mixed response to the truth revealed in Jesus. At best, the people are divided in their response to Jesus (John 7:43; 9:16). Many do not recognize Jesus (1:10). Some believe, but often for dubious reasons. The religious leaders seem to be agreed that Jesus needs to be killed (5:18; 7:1). It is this 'world' which God loves.

In this New Testament theological concept, God does not love people because they are loveable. He loves people because of the special quality of his love. His love is not based on the condition of the receiver. His love flows from the nature of his deity.⁷ It is merely human, writes Matthew, to love those who love you, and "even tax collectors" do that (Gospel according to Matthew 5:46). God loves those who don't love him at all (Matthew 5:45) and, significantly, invites his children to do the same (Matthew 5:48).

(3) The full extent of God's love is known in his action of giving up his only Son for humanity. Without this dimension, according to John, the full extent of God's love cannot be known. The first letter ascribed to John contains a statement very similar to John 3:16: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). The mind of a reader of the New Testament may wander back to the story of a patriarch ready to sacrifice his only son, and the drama of Abraham and Isaac walking together on the way to the place of sacrifice in Genesis 22. Though most Muslims do not believe that the son of sacrifice was Isaac, they acknowledge the quality of the obedience of Abraham in the celebration of *'īd al-adḥā*. To appreciate the pathos of a father willing to sacrifice his only son is instinctive. John writes that if humanity is to comprehend the true nature of God's love, it must know that God the Father gave his Son. The apostle Paul wrote that it is this dimension of God's love which gives humans the assurance of his care for them: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32).

(4) A further quality of the love of God in the New Testament is that God the Father sent his Son to die. Jesus himself showed his own love for humanity by laying down his life for his friends; he said, "Greater love has no one than this" (John 15:23). John 3:16 refers to the benefits which will come to humanity through God's gift of his Son. That the benefits will come through the death of Jesus is made explicit in many other texts. The apostle Paul wrote, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). A similar affirmation is found in 1 John: "This is love: not

⁷ A. NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, pp. 75-76.

that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin" (4:10). Both of these statements serve to confirm point (2) above. For the Messiah to die for human sin (1 Corinthians 15:3) means that humans are sinners. Jesus was known as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Paul further describes the objects of God's love as the "powerless," "the ungodly," and "God's enemies" (Romans 5:6, 10).

Familiarity with Islam will intimate that the very confession which for Christians illuminates the love of the Creator God for humanity becomes a stumbling block for Muslims to enter into the experience of that love. Most Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross, and the confession of Jesus as "Son of God" strikes most Muslims as blasphemy. In the terms of the Gospel, however, how is the full extent of God's love to be conveyed if these two aspects are set aside?

(5) John ties the love of God firmly to a happening in history. When God gave his Son, he demonstrated the unique quality of his love—what more could he do to make the point to humanity? God demonstrated his love in a tangible, particular way. It is an event in history which can be pointed to and claimed as assurance. This was exactly the point which the Nestorian patriarch Timothy made when making a case for the death of Jesus in front of the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī in the second century of Muslim rule. Timothy argued that it was necessary that the death of Jesus be witnessed by all so that all could have the assurance of the fruit of the crucifixion—eternal life.⁸

1.2. The link between divine love and human love

A notable feature of love in the New Testament is that love of humans for God and for other humans is based squarely on the love of God for humanity demonstrated in Jesus. The source of human love is the love of God: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:14). Jesus commanded his followers, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). Human love for God in the New Testament is reciprocal; God has already demonstrated his love for humanity in an unmistakable way. Human love for others finds its best example in the love which Jesus showed. And the New Testament is explicit about the qualities of that love.

Human love in the New Testament is based not only on the general concept that God loves humans, but explicitly on the particular way that God showed his love. After specifying carefully that God showed his love by sending his Son to

⁸ Alphonse MINGANA, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1928), pp. 181-182.

die for human sin, the first letter of John says, “since God *loved us in this way*,⁹ we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11). It is not only the fact of love, but the manner: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus the Messiah laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 John 3:16). The famous theological affirmation, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16),¹⁰ occurs not only in the context of affirmations about Son of God and the death of Jesus for human sin, but also entirely within a passage which urges readers to “love one another.”

Other New Testament passages capture this theme of love for others based on God’s particular love, for example Ephesians 5:1, 2: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” When the children know they are loved, they can be commanded to show not only the best of human love, but the love of God himself. Paul immediately applies this concept of imitation to a very practical situation: “Husbands, love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her...” (Ephesians 5:25).

It is essential to note that Jesus’ astonishing command to love enemies (Matthew 5:44) is also based on imitation of God. God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). “Just as God’s love is a love for sinners, so the Christian’s love is a love for enemies. God’s love for sinners and Christian love for enemies are correlatives,” writes Anders Nygren. “When Christian love is directed to enemies, it shows itself to be real Agape, spontaneous and creative. It creates fellowship even where fellowship seemed impossible.”¹¹

2. The Language of Love in the Qur’ān

2.1. God’s love for people in the Qur’ān

The Qur’ān contains many statements about Allah loving or not loving. The two Arabic verbs used to express the love of Allah in the Qur’ān are *aḥabba* and *wadda*. The most common Qur’ānic verb for to love, *aḥabba*, means to love, to

⁹ This rendering makes the point more clearly than the NIV’s “God so loved us.”

¹⁰ A. NYGREN calls this “the supreme formal statement” of the content of Christian agape in the New Testament, and the second of the three most important texts which have shaped Christian thinking about love throughout history. *Agape and Eros*, pp. 147, 158. The third text which Nygren indicates is—as one would expect—“Paul’s Agape-hymn” of 1 Corinthians 13.

¹¹ A. NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, p. 102.

like, to approve, to esteem, or to take pleasure in.¹² This verb appears 64 times in the Qur'ān, twice in the perfect active and otherwise in the imperfect active. These occurrences include a substantial group of statements characterizing the love of Allah. In 39 instances, the subject of the verb is Allah and the object is various people. Some 17 statements specify those whom Allah loves, and 22 statements indicate those whom Allah does not love.

According to the Qur'ān, Allah loves the “good-doers”¹³ (*muḥsinūn*, 2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:93), the “just” (*muqsiṭūn*, 5:42; 49:9; 60:8), and the “godfearing” (*muttaqūn*, 9:4, 7). These three objects of Allah’s love appear most frequently among a total of 11 different objects. On the other hand, Allah does not love the “evildoers” (*ẓālimūn*, 3:57, 140; 42:40), the “proud and boastful” (*mukhtālan fakhūran*, 4:36; 31:18; 57:23), and the “workers of corruption” (*muḥsidūn*, 5:64; 28:77). There are a total of 14 different kinds of people whom Allah does not love. For readers familiar with the Gospel parables of Jesus, a striking occurrence of *aḥabba* is that Allah does not love the “prodigal” (*musrifūn*, 6.141, 7.31). Another noteworthy statement is that Allah loves those “who fight (*qātala*) in his way” (61:4).

The noun for love from the verb *aḥabba*, *maḥabba*, occurs only once in the Qur'ān, in the midst of a story about the baby Moses. There Allah says, “I loaded on you [Moses] love from me” (20.39). The verbal noun *ḥubb* appears more frequently, but not in relation to God’s love.¹⁴

The second verb for love in the Qur'ān is *wadda*, which means to love, affect, or wish for.¹⁵ The 16 occurrences of this verb in Muslim scripture seem to give the sense of “to wish for.” However, two other words derived from this verb occur in relation to Allah. On the Day of Resurrection, Allah will assign love (*wudd*) to “those who believe and do deeds of righteousness” (19:96). The

¹² Edward William LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon: Derived from the best and most copious Eastern sources* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), Book I, Part 2, p. 495. The resemblance of this verbal form to the Hebrew *āhav* in such texts as Deuteronomy 6:5 (“Love the Lord your God...”) and Leviticus 19:18 (“...love your neighbour as yourself...”) will be noted.

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of the Qur'ān are those of Arthur ARBERRY, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). Verse numbering, however, follows the standard Cairo system.

¹⁴ Lane defined *ḥubb* as “love, affection; inclination of the nature, or natural disposition, towards a thing that pleases, or delights.” *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 2, 496. Denis Gril writes that *ḥubb* is used in most of its nine Qur'ānic occurrences for “that which occupies the human heart first and foremost, passion and worldly goods.” “Love and Affection,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Jane Dammen MCAULIFFE, general editor (Leiden: Brill, 2003), Vol. III, 235. Gril also notes that the term *ḥubb*, in the sense of human love, is only used once with an apparently negative connotation. “Love and Affection,” p. 234.

¹⁵ E. W. LANE, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 8, p. 2931.

Qur'ānic prophet Shuayb is portrayed as describing his Lord as “loving” (*wadūd*) in 11:90¹⁶; and the same term is used to describe Allah in 85:14. In these two verses *wadūd* is associated with forgiveness and mercy.¹⁷

One verse which uses the verb *aḥabba* seems to make the love of Allah conditional upon obedience to the messenger, and it also leads us into consideration of human love for Allah in the Qur'ān. “Say, ‘If you love Allah, follow me; then Allah will love you and forgive your sins. Allah is forgiving, merciful’” (3.31). Here again the love of Allah is associated with forgiveness and mercy. The “me” in the verse is understood by most Muslims to be the reciter of the Qur'ān, the “messenger,” in turn understood by most to be the prophet of Islam.

2.2. Human love in the Qur'ān

The number of verses in the Qur'ān which refer to human love are considerably fewer than those which describe the love of Allah. In all, there appear to be between 14 and 16 verses which refer to human love in some way, using both of the verbs *aḥabba* and *wadda*.

2.3. Human love for Allah

There are three or perhaps five verses in the Qur'ān which refer to human love for Allah, all of them using forms of the verb *aḥabba*. In canonical order, the first verse to refer to human love for Allah is 2.165: “...there are people who set up equals to Allah, whom they love as they love Allah. Those who believe, however, have greater love (*ḥubb*) for Allah...” This verse follows a list of some of the signs which Allah has given to people to demonstrate his power and mercy. The appropriate response of humankind to its Creator is an important theme in the Qur'ān.

Another verse states that in place of the one who rejects his religion, “Allah will bring a people whom he loves and who love him (*yuḥibbūnahu*), humble towards the believers, disdainful towards the unbelievers, men who struggle (*jāhada*) in the path of God, not fearing the reproach of any reproacher.” (5.54) The context of the verse appears to be polemical engagement with Jews and

¹⁶ Lane defined *wadūd* as an epithet applied to God, “the loving towards his servants,...or, towards those who obey”; or “He who regards with approbation his righteous servant.” *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book I, Part 8, p. 2931. Muhammad Daud Rahbar commented on 11:90: “The passage concludes with the idea that if the people of Shu‘ayb asked forgiveness of God, God would have mercy on them and would love them.” *God of Justice: A study in ethical doctrine of the Qur’an* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 174.

¹⁷ Cf. D. Gril, “Love and Affection,” p. 233.

Christians. This verse also brings together Allah's love for humans with human love for Allah.

The third verse which refers to human love for Allah, and perhaps the best known of all, is 3.31, quoted above. In this verse, human love for Allah apparently needs to be proven through obedience to the speaker of the verse ("follow me"). Allah's love for the listener is conditional upon the listener's compliance. Because the command in the subsequent verse is to "obey Allah and the messenger," most Muslims understand the speaker to be the messenger, and many Muslim interpreters understand that messenger to be Muḥammad.¹⁸ Allah's love is not available to the one who refuses to follow the prophet's *sunna*. This impression of conditional love seems to be supported by the appearance of one of the negative *aḥabba* statements in the next verse: "Should they turn their backs, surely Allah does not love the unbelievers (*kāfirūn*)" (3.32).

A fourth verse which may refer to human love for Allah is 2.177. Some scholars translate this verse as, "...the righteous is he...who gives of his money, for love of him, to the near of kin, the orphans, the needy..." They take "him" to refer to Allah.¹⁹ But the same phrase has been translated "...who gives of his money, in spite of loving it, to the near of kin..."²⁰ The problem is how to render the Arabic expression *'alā ḥubbihī*, and the unspecified identity of its final 3ms possessive suffix ('of him' or 'of it?'). The expression occurs once more at 76.8, where the context appears to favour "of him."²¹ The following verse reads, "We feed you only for the face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness; for we fear from our Lord a frowning day, inauspicious."

This seems to be the sum total of verses in the Qur'ān on human love for Allah. The three Qur'anic texts which Muslim theologians and Sufi mystics have

¹⁸ For example AL-ṬABARĪ, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, eds., Second edition (Cairo, 1955-69), Vol. VI, pp. 322-325. Cf. Mahmoud M. AYOUB, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters, Vol. II, The House of 'Imrān* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 81-85. IBN ISHĀQ understood these words to have been spoken by Muḥammad in the midst of his answer to the delegation of Christians from Najrān. *Sīrat al-Nabī*, Muḥammad Muḥīyā al-Dīn 'Abd al-Hamīd, ed. (Cairo: Maktaba Muḥammad 'Alī Ṣabīh wa Awlād, 1963), Vol. II, p. 417. Cf. Alfred GUILLAUME (trans.), *The Life of Muhammad* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 274.

¹⁹ For example George Sale, Marmaduke Pickthall, N.J. Dawood, Ahmed Ali and Alan Jones.

²⁰ By, for example, Majid Fakhry, Arthur Arberry, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem and T.B. Irving.

²¹ Arberry gives "for love of Him," as do Ahmed Ali, Irving, Pickthall and Jones. Frederick M. DENNY also suggests that 76.8 speaks of love for God. "The Problem of Salvation in the Quran: Key Terms and Concepts," in *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, A.H. Green, ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1984), pp. 199-200. However, Abdel Haleem and Dawood disagree.

most often taken as an entry into the discussion of human love for Allah are 2.165, 3.31 and 5.54.²²

2.3. Human love for humans

Human love for people is referred to a number of times in the Qur'ān. Three verses in this category use the verb *aḥabba* at 3.119, 9.24, and 59.9. More numerous are the verses using a noun from the verb *wadda*, and these verses contain some noteworthy expressions.

In canonical sequence, the first of the verses using *aḥabba* seems to refer to believers loving people outside of their religious community. “There you are, you love them, but they do not love you, and you believe in the entire book...” (3.119). This verse seems to reflect a situation of conflict, and follows immediately after the command, “O believers, do not take as close friends other than your own people” (3.118).

The purpose of the second verse seems to be to encourage a priority of love for Allah and his messenger. “Say, ‘If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your spouses, your relatives, the wealth you have gained, commerce you fear may slacken, and dwellings you love, are dearer (*aḥabb*) to you than Allah and his messenger, and striving (*jihād*) in his way, then wait until Allah fulfils his decree. Allah does not guide the sinful people” (9.24). The context of this verse seems to be a battle situation. Love for relatives is referred to, but the context seems to indicate that familial love is not appropriate in this case. Immediately preceding 9.24 is the verse, “O believers, take not your fathers and brothers to be your friends, if they prefer unbelief to belief; whosoever of you takes them for friends, those—they are the evildoers” (9.23).

The third verse reads: “And those who had already established themselves and embraced their faith before them love (*yuhibbūna*) those who emigrated to them; and they do not find in their hearts any need for what had been bestowed upon them and prefer them to themselves, even if they are in dire need” (59.9). The context of this verse appears to be a situation of conflict. Muslim scholars understand it to have been first recited in Medina, and many relate it to the story of the expulsion of the Jews from Medina. The verse seems to refer to the Muslim residents of Medina (*al-anṣār*) loving the Muslims who emigrated to Medina from Mecca (*al-muḥājirūn*).

²² Ignaz GOLDZIHNER, “Die Gottesliebe in der islamischen Theologie,” *Der Islam* 9 (1919), pp. 144–158. Cf. Reynold A. NICHOLSON, “Love (Muhammadan),” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915), Vol. VIII, p. 176.

A greater range of expressions of love between people appear to be included in the eight occurrences of the participle *mawadda*, which means “love, friendship,” or “affection.” This is the word which is used in the felicitous expression at 5.82, “...you shall find the closest in affection (*mawadda*) to the believers those who say: ‘we are Christians.’”²³ Sadly, this same verse declares, “You shall find the most hostile people to the believers to be the Jews and those who associate.”

Another verse using this expression portrays good relationships as a gift from Allah. “And of his signs is that he created for you, from yourselves, spouses to settle down with and he established friendship (*mawadda*) and mercy between you. In that are surely signs for a people who reflect” (30.21). A similar recommendation of good relationships seems to be indicated in 42.23: “This is the good tidings God gives to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: ‘I do not ask of you a wage for this, except love (*mawadda*) for the kinsfolk....’”

Sometimes *mawadda* is used with a negative sense, such as in the command to not give this love to the enemy (60.1): “O believers, take not my enemy and your enemy for friends, offering them love (*mawadda*), though they have disbelieved in the truth that has come to you, expelling the messenger and you because you believe in God and your Lord.”²⁴ In the same *sūra*, 60.7 seems to suggest that Allah may “establish love (*mawadda*)” between the believers and those who were their enemies. The subsequent verses (60.8-9) seem to explain that generosity and just dealing are possible toward those who did not fight the believers or drive them out of their homes. However, friendship with “those who fought you in religion” is in any case not possible.²⁵

²³ Jane Dammen McAULIFFE provides a description and analysis of the Muslim exegetical tradition on this verse in *Qur'ānic Christians: An analysis of classical and modern exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 204-239; as well as in “Christians in the Qur'ān and Tafsīr,” in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: Historical Survey*, Jacques Waardenburg, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 112-115. McAuliffe makes clear that to the classical exegetes, the Christians indicated in this verse were not generally the Christians with whom the exegetes were familiar.

²⁴ Some Muslim exegetes identified the “enemy” in 60.1 with the groups specified in 5.51: “O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Whoso of you makes them his friends is one of them. God guides not the people of the evildoers.” For example, the 20th-century Shī'ī exegete Ṭabāṭabā'ī used 5.51, as well as 3.28 and 58.22 (in which *wadda* again appears with a negative sense), to argue that there be no love and affection between Muslims and non-Muslims. J. D. McAULIFFE, “Christians in the Qur'ān,” pp. 111-112, 118, n. 47.

²⁵ Two other occurrences of *mawadda* do not seem helpful in explaining the positive Qur'ānic concept: 4.73 and 29.25.

This survey of Qur'ānic material on love has shown a substantial number of verses referring to Allah's love for various kinds of people. The number of verses on human love for people form a smaller group; and the Qur'ānic verses referring to human love for Allah make up the smallest group of all. Denis Gril therefore observes that passages giving strong expression to the love between God and humans "occur infrequently in the Qur'ān."²⁶ Reynold Nicholson, a scholar of Sufism, characterized the Qur'ānic references to divine love as comparatively "arid and perfunctory allusions."²⁷

3. Scholarly Reflections on the Qur'ānic Material

1. The language of love in the Qur'ān shows a number of similarities to the language of love in the Gospel. However, after surveying the Qur'ānic material, one notes the absence of some themes which a reader familiar with the New Testament might have expected to find. The imperative forms of the verbs *aḥabba* and *wadda*, commanding people to love either Allah or other people, do not appear in the Qur'ān. Similarly, the theological affirmation that "Allah is love," using either Arabic verbal root, does not appear in the Muslim scripture. As noted above, there are 17 statements in the Qur'ān about Allah loving various righteous humans. However, there is no general affirmation that Allah loves humanity.²⁸

The Qur'ānic material on love has attracted scholarly analysis and theological reflection. Scholars who have focused the Qur'ānic material have tended to address questions such as whether there is a concept of unconditional love in the Qur'ān, and whether the Sufi development of the theme of love can be legitimately derived from the Qur'ān. Theologians have asked whether the concept of God developed elsewhere in the Qur'ān influences the scope of God's ability to love humanity. They also discuss whether there is an explicit link between divine and human love in the Qur'ān.

2. Muslim thought has generally gone in two directions with the theme of the love of God. In the great works of Muslim scholarship there has been relatively little discussion of the love of God. Traditional Muslim orthodoxy has given its best efforts to the development of Islamic Law, in preference to theological themes.²⁹ However, on either side of the traditional approach Muslims have given

²⁶ D. GRIL, "Love and Affection," p. 234.

²⁷ R.A. NICHOLSON, "Love (Muhammadan)," p. 176.

²⁸ Cf. M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 172.

²⁹ Joseph SCHACHT, "Theology and Law in Islam," in *Theology and Law in Islam*, G.E. von Grunebaum, ed. (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1971), pp. 3-23. Cf. J.N.D. ANDERSON, *God's Law and God's Love: An essay in comparative religion* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 98. Andrew

expression to extreme views on the love of God. The extreme Muslim sentiment of the insignificance of this theme appears to be the statement attributed to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350/751)³⁰ that strictly speaking, God “neither loves nor is loved.”³¹ The opposite extreme is a “thorough-going pantheism”³² in certain mystical tendencies, in which the experience of human love for God is understood as annihilation in the Godhead.

The Sufi development of the language of love is a fascinating and important topic, but an adequate description falls outside the scope of this study.³³ Relevant to this paper, however, is the Sufi understanding of the Qur'ānic verses on love indicated above. One would not expect such material in commentary on most of these verses, because Sufis have generally not expressed a great deal about the love of God for humans.³⁴ However, some indications of Sufi interpretation of verses which mention human love for God will be presented below.

3. In his study of the history of Muslim theology, A.S. Tritton found that the theme of God's love for humans was one of the ideas left undeveloped by the orthodox Muslim theologians.³⁵ One reason for this may be the state of the Qur'ānic material itself. Denis Gril writes, “The few passages in the Qur'ān dealing with love have scarcely encouraged authors to extract from the Qur'ān the

RIPPIN, *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 88.

³⁰ This indicates the year of al-Jawziyya's death in both A.D. and A.H. (“Anno Hegirae”—lunar years dated from the *hijra* in 622 A.D.).

³¹ *Innahu lā yuḥibba wa lā yuḥabba...* I. GOLDZIEHER, “Die Gottesliebe,” p. 146, quoting the *Ṣifā al-‘alīl fī masā’il al-qadr wa ’l-ḥikma wa ’l-ta’līl* of al-Jawziyya. A.S. TRITTON attributed the same expression to the earlier “Imām al-Ḥaramain,” ‘Abd al-Malik al-Juwainī (d. 1085/478). *Muslim Theology* (London: Luzac, 1947), pp. 9, 185. Cf. Morris S. SEALE, *Muslim Theology: A study of origins with reference to the Church Fathers*, Second Edition (London: Luzac, 1980), p. 91.

³² A.R. NICHOLSON, “Love (Muhammadan),” p. 177. Or even “monism.” J.N.D. ANDERSON, *God's Law and God's Love*, p. 103.

³³ A good recent article on this topic is Joseph LUMBARD, “From *ḥubb* to ‘*ishq*: The development of love in early Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18/3 (2007), pp. 345-385.

³⁴ “Sūfīs have little to say of the love of God to man, in comparison with what they say of man's love to God. The latter was incumbent upon the servant, the former but an act of grace to which the servant had no claim. The Sūfīs would not dream of attributing to God feelings akin to their own, He was to them the unique and incomparable object of adoration. Such a conception as that of the Christian mystic who thought of God's love as pursuing the soul, a conception which had reached its highest development in the Christian doctrine of Redemption, was impossible to the Sūfīs; hence they describe God as the Beloved and throw all the emphasis on the human side.” Margaret SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic & Her Fellow Saints in Islām* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p. 92. See also J. LUMBARD, “From *ḥubb* to ‘*ishq*,” 384, on al-Ghazālī's description of the love of God for humans.

³⁵ A.S. TRITTON, *Muslim Theology*, p. 9.

fundamentals of divine and human love.”³⁶ Even a simple word study approach seems not to have attracted the scholarly interest of Muslim or even western non-Muslim scholars, writes Gril: “Unless the present writer is mistaken—it seems that no author has attempted a synthesis of all the passages in the Qur’ān dealing with love and its associated concepts.”³⁷

3.1. Love of God for humans

4. The love of Allah for people who do righteous deeds is certainly affirmed in the Qur’ān. Some scholars who have studied the Qur’ānic material extensively, however, question whether the love of Allah in the Qur’ān is unconditional. One modern Muslim scholar who studied both of the Arabic verbs for “to love” in the context of the overall theology of the Qur’ān was Muhammad Daud Rahbar. As he wrote his PhD dissertation at Cambridge—later published as *God of Justice*—he reflected on the verses which contain forms of the verbs *aḥabba* and *wadda*. He suggested that, “Unqualified Divine Love for mankind is an idea completely alien to the Qur’ān. In fact ‘to love’ is a phrase too strong to convey the idea of *aḥabba* which can be rendered equally well as ‘to like or to approve.’”³⁸

Daud Rahbar wrote that even if the scriptural *yuhibba* with Allah as the subject is translated as “he loves,” nowhere does the Qur’ān offer the idea that Allah loves humankind. Allah’s love is conditional, concluded Daud Rahbar.³⁹ Allah loves those who do righteous deeds. In making this argument, Daud Rahbar listed all the objects of Allah’s love in the Qur’ān in a similar way to that done in section II above. He also cited 3.31 (“If you love God, follow me, and God will love you...”) as a good example of the conditional love of Allah. About the name *wadūd* in 11.90, Daud Rahbar wrote, “The passage concludes with the idea that if the people of Shu‘ayb asked forgiveness of God, God would have mercy on them and would love them.”⁴⁰

In his discussion of Daud Rahbar’s conclusions on the love of God in the Qur’ān, Frederick Denny agrees with Daud Rahbar about “the conditional character” of that love.⁴¹ Denny cites 19.96 (“Surely those who believe and do

³⁶ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” p. 236.

³⁷ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” pp. 236-237.

³⁸ M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 172.

³⁹ M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 225.

⁴⁰ M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 174.

⁴¹ F.M. DENNY, “The Problem of Salvation in the Quran: Key Terms and Concepts,” in *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism: Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, A.H. GREEN, ed. (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1984), pp. 199-200.

deeds of righteousness...”) and 5.54 (“...God will assuredly bring a people He loves, and who love Him...”) as examples of conditional love.

5. Some scholars have suggested that the language of love in the Qur'ān should be expanded to include other concepts, such as mercy and forgiveness.⁴² Denny insists that the terms be kept distinct. He writes that the providential mercy of God is central to his nature in the Qur'ān. However, such is not the case with love, writes Denny. “It is erroneous to confuse *rahma* [“mercy”] and *maghfira* [“forgiveness”] with love (*ḥubb* or *wudd*)...His mercy is offered to all, but His love only to select ones.”⁴³ Denis Gril, on the other hand, suggests a connection between love and the root *ra'afa*, “to have pity,” at 9.128 and 57.27.⁴⁴ In either case, it should be noted that thought including mercy and forgiveness in the language of love would certainly expand the expressions of God's actions toward humans, it would not change the material on either human love for God or human love for people.

6. One of the dimensions of scholarly analysis is the question of whether the affirmation that God loves people is consistent with the overall portrait of God in the Qur'ān. Denis Gril, for example, suggests, “To say that one is loved by God is, in the view of the Qur'ān, all the more unacceptable in that such a pretension is part and parcel of a certain confusion of the human and the divine....”⁴⁵ Norman Anderson notes that Muslim theologians were later not able to include ‘Love’ or ‘Loving’ among the seven ‘Eternal Attributes’ of God (*al-ṣifāt al-azālīya*).⁴⁶

This direction in scholarly analysis seemed to be affirmed in a very recent Muslim presentation on the love of Allah at a conference held under the auspices of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan. Murad Wilfried Hofmann spoke on “Differences between the Muslim and the Christian Concept of Divine Love.”⁴⁷ Hofmann located the key difference in the two concepts of love in the discourse about God within the respective faiths. He noted a tendency

⁴² The case was made recently by Dr. Caner DAGLI in a panel on “Evangelical and Muslim Discussion of A *Common Word* and the Yale Center's ‘Christian Response’”, at the American Academy of Religions meetings, Chicago, November 3, 2008.

⁴³ F.M. DENNY, “The Problem of Salvation in the Quran,” p. 199.

⁴⁴ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” 233-4. At 9.128 the description *ra'ūf*, “kind,” is given to “a messenger,” whom Muslims understand to be the prophet of Islam. At 57.27 the quality of *ra'fa*, “kindliness,” is ascribed to the followers of Jesus.

⁴⁵ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” p. 233.

⁴⁶ J.N.D. ANDERSON, *God's Law and God's Love*, p. 98.

⁴⁷ Murad Wilfried HOFMANN, “Differences between the Muslim and the Christian Concept of Divine Love,” paper presented at the 14th General Conference, Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, September 4-7, 2007, Amman, Jordan. <http://www.aalalbait.org/ar/Research Documents/14.pdf>

among Christians to understand the love of God as corresponding to a “human sentiment,” and to take the loving nature of God as “an essential quality of deity.” In the Qur’ān, explained Hofmann, Allah is self-sufficient, and this description “definitely excludes that Allah is in love with his creation the way humans treasure, desire and miss each other....” Hofmann insisted, “God cannot possibly love his creation that human way!”⁴⁸ He therefore recommended that the language of love not be used in reference to God.⁴⁹

Hofmann provided in his article lists of those whom Allah loves or does not love in the Qur’ān, similar to the description above. “In all these cases Allah ‘loves’ must be understood as Allah ‘approves,’ ‘is content with’ or ‘views positively’ those who act as described. ‘Love’ here does not refer to emotional involvement.”⁵⁰ Hofmann noted a number of other verses (19.96, 3.31, 5.54) which “could be seen as proof for a love of God for his creation comparable to the love human beings are capable of.” However, this impulse would clash with the general Muslim concept of God, according to Hofmann. “This interpretation must be ruled out as incompatible with the very nature of God as sublime and totally self-sufficient.”⁵¹

Hofmann further suggests that a “major theoretical discrepancy” between the Christian and Muslim teachings on love is that “...the concept of loving one’s enemy is nowhere to be found in Islamic doctrine.” He claims, however, that on the one hand Christians have never really loved their enemies, and that on the other hand asking people to do what goes against human nature is detrimental for public morality because it breeds hypocrisy and cynicism.⁵²

3.2. Love of humans for God

7. As noted in section II above, the Qur’ān contains several verses which mention human love for Allah. Readers’ assessments of the material on human love for Allah in the Qur’ān may well be influenced by what they conclude about the love of Allah for humans there. The three Qur’anic texts which Muslim theologians and Sufi mystics have most often taken as an entry into the discussion of human love for Allah are 2.165, 3.31 and 5.54.⁵³ It is interesting to see what exegetes from the Muslim interpretive tradition wrote about the meanings of these three

⁴⁸ M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” p. 8.

⁴⁹ M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” p. 8.

⁵⁰ M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” p. 9.

⁵¹ M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” p. 9.

⁵² M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” pp. 10-11.

⁵³ I. GOLDZIHNER, “Die Gottesliebe,” pp. 144-158.

verses. The commentaries give a sense of the spirit in which these verses have been understood by traditionalist Muslim scholars.

The earliest extant complete commentary on the Qur'ān is that of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150 A.H./767 A.D.). Muqātil understood Q3.31 to be about a group of Jews in Madīna who had claimed that they were “the sons of Allah and his beloved.” (Q5.18)⁵⁴ Allah then revealed 3.31, according to Muqātil, to instruct these Jews to follow the religion (*dīn*) of Muḥammad.⁵⁵ Muqātil does not take this opportunity to explain human love for Allah, or Allah's love for people. He seems rather more interested in the authority of Muḥammad and the necessity of its acceptance by the Jews.

The first major commentator in the classical tradition, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 A.H./923 A.D.), similarly wrote that 3.31 is a denial of a false claim. However, in his mind the audience was a group of Christians who come from Najrān to meet Muḥammad in Madīna, and their claim is that they show their love for God by magnifying Jesus.⁵⁶ The command of Allah to the Christians, according to al-Ṭabarī, is to follow Muḥammad. Only then will Allah “love you and forgive you your sins.”⁵⁷ The Christians must first acknowledge that Muḥammad is an apostle of Allah to them, must follow him and certify that what Muḥammad brought them is from Allah.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihāta, ed. (Beirut: Mū'sasat al-Tārīkh al-'Arabiyya, 2002), Vol. I, pp. 270-271. The full text of 5.18: “Say the Jews and Christians, ‘We are the sons of God, and His beloved ones.’ Say: ‘Why then does He chastise you for your sins? No; you are mortals, of His creating; He forgives whom He will, and He chastises whom He will.’ For to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and of the earth, and all that is between them; to Him is the homecoming.”

⁵⁵ Muqātil, *Tafsīr*, Vol. I, p. 271. This is also one of the possibilities cited by AL-WĀḤIDĪ (d. 1076/468) for the “occasion of revelation” of this verse. *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), p. 54.

⁵⁶ This is another possibility for the “occasion of revelation” suggested by AL-WĀḤIDĪ, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr AL-ṬABARĪ, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir, eds., Second edition (Cairo, 1955-69), Vol. VI, pp. 323-325.

⁵⁸ AL-ṬABARĪ, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, Vol. VI, 324-5. Response to the prophet of Islam is a strong theme in relation to both Jews and Christians in the narrative framework of the earliest commentaries on the Qur'ān. See, for example, Gordon NICKEL, “Early Muslim Accusations of *Tahrīf*: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān's commentary on key Qur'ānic verses,” in *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, David THOMAS, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 207-223.

In his commentary on 3.31, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 A.H./1144 A.D.) wrote analytically on both Allah’s love for humans and human love for Allah.⁵⁹ “‘The love (*maḥabba*) of humans for Allah’ is a figurative expression (*majāz*) for their desire to serve Him alone, and their wish for it. ‘The love of Allah for his servants’ means that he is pleased with them and commends their performance.”⁶⁰ At the phrase “then follow me,” however, al-Zamakhsharī seemed to attack some Muslims of his day who openly professed to love Allah.

Whoever claims to love him and contradicts the *sunna* of his apostle is a liar, and the book of Allah calls him such. When you see someone speaking about the love of Allah, clapping his hands while speaking it, transported with joy, groaning and falling unconscious, you can be sure that such a person does not understand what Allah is, and does not know what the love of Allah is. His clapping, his ecstasy, his groaning and his falling unconscious only mean that in his wicked (*khabīth*) soul he imagines a brilliant, loveable form which—in his ignorance and immorality—he calls “Allah.”⁶¹ This idea calls forth the clapping, rapture, groaning and losing consciousness.⁶¹

Al-Zamakhsharī continued to explain his understanding of the two loves in his exegesis of the third verse on human love for Allah, 5.54.⁶² There he also made explicit that his attack was on the Sufi understanding of the concept. On “he loves them and they love him,” al-Zamakhsharī wrote, “the love of humans for their Lord means obeying (*tā‘a*) him and a desire to satisfy him and to not do what brings his anger and punishment. And the love of Allah for his servants is that he repays them with the best reward for their obedience, exalts and commends them, and is pleased with them.”⁶³ But then he again turned his attention to the Sufis and described them as the most ignorant of humankind, the greatest enemies of knowledge, the greatest haters of the Law, the most evil order of men, and liars.⁶⁴ God is high above what these Sufis profess about love and passion (*‘ishq*), wrote al-Zamakhsharī—singing on their chairs and in their dance halls, listening to love poetry and losing consciousness. Interestingly, al-Zamakhsharī faulted the Sufis

⁵⁹ Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq al-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh al-Ta’wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2006), Vol. I, pp. 347-348.

⁶⁰ AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, p. 347. Cf. D.S. MARGOLIOUTH, *Chrestomathia Baidawiana: The Commentary of el-Baiḍāwī on Sura III* (London: Luzac & Co., 1894), p. 157, n. 139.

⁶¹ AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, p. 347. Cf. I. GOLDZIEHER, “Die Gottesliebe,” 158.

⁶² AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, pp. 630-635.

⁶³ AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, pp. 633-634. Cf. I. GOLDZIEHER, “Die Gottesliebe,” 157.

⁶⁴ AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, p. 634.

for relating the love of God to his essence rather than to his attributes,⁶⁵ and for teaching that one must be 'drunk with love' in order to love truly.⁶⁶

Much more could be offered from the vast ocean of traditional Muslim exegesis. These few excerpts do not indicate an impulse on the part of orthodox commentators to develop a free theological reflection on the theme of love. Rather, they seem to show an effort to circumscribe the meanings of *aḥabba*. Al-Zamaksharī's exegesis tends to keep the interpretation of love close to the orthodox conception of the relationship of Allah to humans as that of Master to slaves.⁶⁷ Muqātil and al-Ṭabarī seemed to want to deny the claim of non-Muslims who said Allah loved them. Together with al-Zamaksharī's brutal⁶⁸ critique of those mystical Muslims who have become best known for emphasizing human love for God, these sources suggest a deep ambivalence in medieval Islam about the meaning of the language of love in the Qur'ān.

In more recent reflection, Daud Rahbar has related the question of human love for God closely to the Qur'ānic understanding of God's love for humans. He observed,

The relationship of love...is a reciprocal one. The Qur'ān never enjoins love for God. This is because God Himself loves only the strictly pious. To love God one must presuppose that God is reciprocating the sentiment. And to presuppose that is to presume that one is perfectly pious. Such presumption the Qur'ān never allows. Even the most virtuous men as prophets are constantly reminded that they are sinful creatures who must ask forgiveness of smallest sins whether they are aware of them or not. Side by side with such a conception of God's unrelaxing justice love for God would certainly be out of place. It is therefore very rarely that the subject of human love for God is touched at all in the Qur'ān.⁶⁹

Daud Rahbar then reviewed the 35 verses in the Qur'ān which mention the subject of human love for God. He concludes, "This is all that the Qur'ān has to say on Godward love. On the other hand, fear of God is the most oft-mentioned Godward sentiment in the Qur'ān and goes so naturally with the idea of the Lord of justice and authority."⁷⁰ If Daud Rahbar's observations about the Qur'ānic

⁶⁵ Here AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ revealed his identity as a *mutakallim*. Cf. I. GOLDZIHNER, "Die Gottesliebe," pp. 151-157.

⁶⁶ AL-ZAMAKHSHARĪ, *al-Kashshāf*, Vol. I, p. 634.

⁶⁷ Cf. J.N.D. ANDERSON, *God's Law and God's Love*, p. 98.

⁶⁸ I. GOLDZIHNER, "Die Gottesliebe," p. 158.

⁶⁹ M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 180. F.M. DENNY concurs: "While God does clearly love (or 'befriend') those who serve Him, it is worthwhile to ask whether the Quran indicates anything concerning *man's* love for God." "The Problem of Salvation in the Quran," p. 199.

⁷⁰ M.D. RAHBAR, *God of Justice*, p. 181.

material are accurate, this may account for the apparent reticence of the classical Muslim exegetes to freely develop the theme of love between God and people.

3.3. Some aspects of mystical interpretation

8. Sufi expressions of human love for Allah seem to have reached a high point already in the second century of Islam in the sayings of a woman from Baṣra named Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 801/185). Later writers attributed to her a number of striking sentiments on disinterested love.⁷¹ Margaret Smith wrote that this was a new conception to her fellow Sufis, “who for the most part served God in hope of eternal reward or in fear of eternal punishment.”⁷²

By contrast, Rābi‘a rather is reputed to have said that she served God neither from fear of Hell nor from love of Paradise, but “only for the love of Him and desire of Him.”⁷³ Rābi‘a is also famous in Sufi lore for distinguishing two kinds of love for God, one that is selfish and one that is worthy of God—a love which seeks only the Beloved and his glory.⁷⁴ One of the most famous of all Sufis, Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/505), did much to pass on these sayings attributed to Rābi‘a in his “Book of love, desire and contentment.”⁷⁵ Rābi‘a’s teaching, however, did not extend to God’s love for humans, writes Margaret Smith. “Her view is in accordance with the view of the earlier Ṣūfīs, that it was incumbent on the servant to love his Lord, but not incumbent on Him to return that love.”⁷⁶

In the discussion of love in Sufi thought, some scholars have seen a rebellion against Muslim orthodoxy to follow signals picked up originally from Eastern Christians.⁷⁷ Some have even suggested that Qur’ānic recitations related to divine

⁷¹ M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, 97f.

⁷² M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, 97.

⁷³ M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, 102.

⁷⁴ M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, 102-103.

⁷⁵ *Kitāb al-maḥabba wa-l-shawq wa-l-uns wa-l-riḍā* in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, pp. 104-105. Cf. J. LUMBARD, “From *ḥubb* to *ishq*,” pp. 377-384. S. VAN DEN BERG, “The ‘love of God’ in Ghazali’s Vivification of theology,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956), pp. 305-321. R.A. NICHOLSON provided a concise précis of the development of the theme of love by al-Ghazālī in “Love (Muhammadan),” 177.

⁷⁶ M. SMITH, *Rābi‘a the Mystic*, 101. J.N.D. ANDERSON writes about Sufis in general: “...the major emphasis was always on man’s love for God as his highest good, rather than on the undeserved love of God for his wayward creatures.” *God’s Love and God’s Law*, 104.

⁷⁷ A.R. NICHOLSON writes about traditions which refer to divine love “belong to the mystical doctrine which developed under Christian influence in the 2nd cent. of Islam.” “Love (Muhammadan),” 176. Cf. M. SMITH, *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1995), pp. 125-152. M.S. SEALE, *Muslim Theology*, 90-91. Samuel M. ZWEMER, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), pp. 102, 111. See also, recently, M.W. HOFMANN, “Differences,” p. 10.

love began when the prophet of Islam came in contact with Christian ideas in Medina.⁷⁸ As was noted above, the question of whether these ideas about love were acceptable was a controversial one within the Muslim community. Many orthodox Muslim scholars, from both the jurists and the *mutakallimūn*, criticized the Sufi understanding strongly.⁷⁹ Andrew Rippin writes that even raising this question has become controversial today because some hear in it the echoes of medieval polemic. The medieval accusation against Islam was that it is a physical, sensual religion, writes Rippin, and the spiritual nature of Islam was denied.⁸⁰ A second possible reason for controversy, however, could be that the Sufi tradition is one of the most highly-regarded aspects of Islam in the West today. To suggest, then, that these mystical tendencies came from outside the religion, indeed from faiths seen as rival or superseded religions, can attract some strong feelings.

More relevant to this study is the the question is whether the Sufi concepts can be said to have developed from the content of the Qur'ān, or whether Sufis read their own experiences into the Qur'ānic verses. Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1230) wrote of Rābi'a that she linked her teaching to Q5.59 ("God will assuredly bring a people He loves, and who love him.")⁸¹ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī mentioned 5.54 several times in his sermons.⁸² Ibn 'Arabī quoted 3.31 and 5.54 first in his list of Qur'ānic verses at the beginning of the chapter on love in his *Fūṭūḥāt*.⁸³ Denis Gril writes, however, that though Sufis quote verses such as 3.31, 5.59 and 2.165, they are "more likely to express their love for God in terms of the Arabic tradition, poetic and private."⁸⁴

The interpretation of 3.31 by famous Sufi commentators on the Qur'ān opens a window into the veneration of the prophet of Islam and how this is connected with the love of God in the minds of Sufis as well as among many traditionalist Muslims. Ibn 'Arabī, for example, wrote on 3.31 that the prophet of Islam is "God's beloved." Therefore, wrote Ibn 'Arabī, love for the prophet of Islam is obligatory for Muslims. Anyone who does not follow the prophet has no part in the love of God. Ibn 'Arabī wrote, "For he is the pole (*qutb*) of love, and his path

⁷⁸ R.A. NICHOLSON, "Love (Muhammadan)," p. 176.

⁷⁹ I. GOLDZICHER, "Die Gottesliebe," p. 158. Cf. Claude ADDAS, "The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn 'Arabī," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 32 (2002), pp. 30, 44.

⁸⁰ A. RIPPIN, *Muslims*, pp. 136-137.

⁸¹ M. SMITH, *Rābi'a the Mystic*, p. 100, quoting from 'AṬṬĀR's *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā*. J.N.D. ANDERSON writes that this phrase was a focus of concentration for Sufis in general. *God's Law and God's Love*, p. 104.

⁸² J. LUMBARD, "From *ḥubb* to *ishq*," p. 351.

⁸³ Cl. ADDAS, "The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn 'Arabī," pp. 30-31.

⁸⁴ D. GRIL, "Love and Affection," p. 236.

(*ṭarīqa*) is the talisman of love.”⁸⁵ There are indeed other passages in the Qur’ān which seem to bring Allah and the prophet of Islam together as objects of human love, such as 9.24, cited above: “...if these are dearer (*aḥabb*) to you than God and his Messenger...” God and his messenger are joined as the object of many other verbs, such as to obey and to believe in. There is also the mysterious statement at 33.56 that “Allah and his angels bless [“pray upon,” *ṣallā ‘alā*]⁸⁶ the prophet. O believers, do you also bless him, and pray him peace.”⁸⁷

3.4. Love of humans for others

9. Does the Qur’ān give significant encouragement for people to love others? In the verses surveyed above, there is some mention of love between believers. But is there clear direction in scripture to love people outside of the *umma*? Denis Gril suggests that, “love or friendship between human beings is not fully recognized by the Qur’ān unless confirmed by faith.”⁸⁸ In his study of the relevant materials, Gril finds a conditional love: “One can only truly love believers, since love for unbelievers separates one from God and attracts one toward this world.... Adopting unbelievers as friends or allies... is equivalent to lining up on the side of the enemies of God.”⁸⁹ The prohibition of offering love to people who have “disbelieved in the truth that has come to you” at 60.1 was noted above. The same concept is given in 58.22: “Thou shalt not find any people who believe in God and the Last Day who are loving (*wādda*) to anyone who opposes God and His Messenger, not though they were their fathers, or their sons, or their brothers, or their clan.”

Gril also relates this conditional character of human love to family relationships, and wonders at “...how little attention the Qur’ān devotes to the love of a man for a woman or that of a woman for a man.”⁹⁰ However, Gril does draw attention to a strong verse in this category using *mawadda*, 30:21: “And of

⁸⁵ M.M. AYOUB, *The Qur’an and its Interpreters*, Vol. II, p. 84, translating from IBN ‘ARABĪ’s *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*.

⁸⁶ Constance PADWICK explored the explanations for this striking expression in a collection of Muslim prayer manuals in *Muslim Devotions: A study of prayer-manuals in common use* (London: SPCK, 1961), pp. 152-166; and Annemarie SCHIMMEL sketched out the role of this *taṣṭīya* in popular piety, and its connection to love for the prophet of Islam. *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The veneration of the prophet in Islamic piety* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987), pp. 92-104.

⁸⁷ The comparison of the veneration of the prophet of Islam, and the requirement of love for him, with New Testament discourse on love in passages such as John 14:15-25, seems to be a largely unexplored area of both scholarship and Christian-Muslim conversation.

⁸⁸ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” p. 234.

⁸⁹ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” p. 235.

⁹⁰ D. GRIL, “Love and Affection,” p. 234.

His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy. Surely in that are signs for a people who consider.”⁹¹

Human love for people does not seem to have been part of the Sufi development of the love theme. Rābi'a, so well known for her expressions of disinterested love for God, was reputed to have said, "...love of the Creator has turned me aside from love of His creatures",⁹² and "...my love to God has so possessed me that not place remains for loving or hating any save Him."⁹³ At the extreme of Sufi mysticism, human love for God was associated with a concept of human annihilation in the divine essence.⁹⁴ How such a concept of human love for God would relate to human love for people is not clear. This interesting question deserves further study.

3.5. The particular quality of love in the Gospel

When considering the Islamic concept of God in a classic study written more than a century ago, Samuel Zwemer noted the paucity of expressions of human love for Allah in the Qur'ān which has been fully described in this study. Zwemer could not help remarking on the contrast between this and "the abundant and plain teaching of the Old and New Testament regarding the love which God requires of man and which flows out from God to man!"⁹⁵ He read the verses of the Qur'ān with the biblical materials looming in the background. His research into the sourcebooks of Islam alerted him to the particular quality of love in the Gospel. But whether scholars of Islam or scholars of literature, many readers of the Bible have been transfixed by the language of love.

This study has demonstrated that there are indeed significant differences between the materials on love in the Qur'ān and Gospel, both in language and theology. It is not simply a matter of different meanings being expressed by the scriptural terminology of love in New Testament Greek and Qur'ānic Arabic. Rather, the difference extends to the characterization of relationships which are envisioned to exist among God and people.

A sensitive and responsible comparison of the materials on love in Christian and Muslim scripture would avoid the combative spirit which accompanied religious polemic when European Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims thought

⁹¹ D. GRIL, "Love and Affection," p. 235.

⁹² M. SMITH, *Rābi'a the Mystic*, p. 99, quoting al-Ghazālī.

⁹³ M. SMITH, *Rābi'a the Mystic*, p. 99, quoting 'Aṭṭār.

⁹⁴ J. LUMBARD, "From *ḥubb* to *ishq*," pp. 351,354, 362.

⁹⁵ ZWEMER, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, p. 101.

of themselves as political enemies behind the walls of Christendom and *Dār al-Islām*. It would also avoid the excessive reticence to address differences which the regime of western political correctness seems to dictate. The first step in nurturing respect for the religious ‘other’ is to acknowledge difference.⁹⁶ Today’s religiously-diverse societies provide many opportunities for friendly faith conversation which has a place for both vigorous interaction with ideas and genuine respect for the partner.

Properly understood, the differences in language and theology raise many exhilarating interfaith questions. One question concerns the importance of the New Testament link between the language of love and divine action among humanity. Section I above noted the Gospel concepts of the visible demonstration of the love of God at a specific time and place, and of the love of humans for others on the pattern of the *sunna* of God.⁹⁷ Does lack of a particular, concrete expression of God’s love affect on the one hand personal knowledge and assurance of God’s love for humanity, and on the other hand the expression of human love for others?

Another question concerns the desire in interfaith relationships that the other experience the benefits which one partner may enjoy. The apostle Paul wanted his readers to be rooted and grounded in love, and to know the love of the Messiah (Ephesians 3:17, 19). It is important to understand the claim that Paul was making. His claim was that the width and length and height and depth of God’s love is to be known in the Messiah, and especially in his death for humanity.⁹⁸ If Christians truly believe in this love and experience it, it is only natural that they will want others to know it as well. The evidence of the Qur’ān seems to be that the unconditional love of God was not part of the worldview out of which this scripture emerged. What does this mean for authentic engagement between devotees of the two faiths?

Many other worthwhile questions could be explored, for example: Is self-giving love indeed the distinguishing mark of the Creator God? Perhaps, however, the matter should rest with the challenge to those who believe in the

⁹⁶ Lamin SANNEH, *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1969), pp. 6-9.

⁹⁷ Interestingly, the phrase *sunnat Allāh* appears eight times in the Qur’ān: at 33:38, 33:62 (x2), 35:43 (x2), 40:85, and 48:23 (x2). “Our sunnah” also appears once with God as speaker, at 17:77. Rosalind W. GWYNNE discusses these occurrences in “The Neglected Sunnah: Sunnat Allāh (The Sunnah of God),” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 10 (1993), pp. 456-458.

⁹⁸ A. NYGREN, *Agape and Eros*, 115-123. Cf. Stauffer, “Agapaō,” p. 49. Similarly in the Gospel according to J. STAUFFER, “Agapaō,” p. 53.

divine commandment to love, to move beyond mere language. “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).