William C. Chittick  


This unusual book appears to have been written with two main aims in mind: firstly, to address the subject of love, its place in Islam and significance for Sufis, in a way that will be accessible to lay or non-specialist readers; and secondly, to celebrate and make better known two masterpieces of Persian literature, the *Kashf al-asrār wa ‘uddat al-abrār* of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī (fl. 1126) and the *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fi sharḥ asmāʾ al-malik al-fattāḥ* of Aḥmad Samʿānī (d. 1167). Translations from these two Persian works make up the greater part by far of this 430-page anthology, and therefore the wider implication of ‘Islamic Literature’ in the second part of the title could more properly be applied to the latter part of the book where passages from other authors, such as Ibn Sīnā, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, Muḥammad Ghazālī, Aḥmad Ghazālī, Rūzbihān Baqlī and Qushayrī, make more of an appearance. At a rough estimate, material included in *Divine Love* comprises some 45% from Maybūdī, 35% from Samʿānī, 10% from ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 1089) and the remaining 10% from other authors.

However, there is no doubt Maybūdī’s *Kashf al-asrār* and Samʿānī’s *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* deserve much greater exposure in Western languages. Moreover, it is only fitting that they should have pride of place in a monograph on love, for they represent an extraordinary moment in Persian cultural history, when the doctrines of mystical love found the perfect literary language for their expression. Chittick correctly reminds us that themes, motifs and metaphors that we later see in the poetry of ‘Aṭṭār, Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ can all be found in the artistic and poetic prose of these two twelfth-century authors.

Both Maybūdī’s *Kashf al-asrār* and Samʿānī’s *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* are exegetical works, the former a commentary on the Qur’an and the latter a commentary on the ninety-nine names of God. Maybūdī’s commentary is structured such that the entire Qur’an is divided into sessions (majālis), each of which is then subdivided into three ‘turns’ or nāwbatān. Of these, the first comprises a translation and the second a conventional commentary on all of the verses, while the third is reserved for a mystical or esoteric commentary on a selection of verses. The third sections, from which Chittick has selected his readings, amount to over 1000 pages in the printed edition. The *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is a shorter work of some 450 pages, but the content is almost entirely mystical in nature, that is, it concerns the purification of the soul or self and the human journey towards union with God.
As a book, Chittick's *Divine Love* is a remarkable labour of love. Some 350 passages, the great majority of these in Persian, have been carefully and faithfully translated into English. It is almost impossible to convey the sweetness and beauty of these Persian works in English, and yet Chittick has overall effectively given us a sense of the subtle and poetic language used by these authors, and captured well the spirit of the Persian originals. In addition, he manages to incorporate contemporary expressions so that the translations do not sound too flowery and archaic.

Individual or related groups of passages are provided with brief introductions—it is clear that Chittick has tried as far as possible to let the texts speak for themselves. But the material is also framed and interwoven with his own reflections on the significance of love and the need for us to turn from the ‘unreal to the Real’. As a whole, the book is arranged in three parts: ‘The Origin of Love’, ‘The Life of Love’ and ‘The Goal of Love’. Broadly speaking these comprise discussions of: the divine nature and origin of love, its role in the creation and the way in which human beings have been divinely chosen and inwardly predisposed towards the love of God (Part One); the need for human beings to recognise the role for which they were created and the way in which they may traverse the path of love towards God (Part Two); and finally, the culmination of the way of love, which means attaining a state of annihilation of the self, and subsistence in God, in other words the true realisation of *tawḥīḍ* (Part Three). Each of the three parts is divided into three chapters and the chapters are further divided into subsections. For every new concept or aspect of love that he introduces, Chittick shows how the teaching is rooted in Qur’anic verses and sayings of the Prophet, and also often provides some general and simplified theological and philosophical background to the topic. In addition, he helpfully juxtaposes these teachings with modern ideas and preconceptions. In a number of contexts he finds imaginative ways to explain theological concepts, as in his section, ‘Between a Rock and a Hard Place’, where he discusses the tension between free will and predestination, and between the creative and religious command.

Not surprisingly, since this is a book on divine love in Islam, frequent reference is made, both in the works themselves and in Chittick’s comments, to the two Qur’anic proof texts that underlie all discourse on love in Islam. The first is part of Q. 5:54, which states, *He loves them and they love Him*, whence Chittick derives the following four axioms: God’s eternally loving nature; humans as the specific object of God’s love; humans’ innate loving nature; and God as the true object of human love. The second proof text is part of Q. 3:31, *Say [o Muhammad] if you love God, follow me; God will love you*, concerning which Chittick explains that by following the guidance embodied in Muḥammad,