

## **A reflection on divine love**

By: Hamza Yusuf

**It is our expectation of God that determines where we are. This points up the need for thinking well not only of God but also of God's creation, despite the fact that we are all messy, imperfect works in progress, struggling along in this journey.**

**Many Muslims believe that the idea, "God loves everyone," is simply wrong and incongruous with Islamic teachings.** Verses abound in the Qur'an decrying those God does not love: liars, hypocrites, oppressors, the arrogant, boastful braggarts, and those who love praise for that which they have not done, among others. Reading these verses, it is easy to begin to resent such people and to believe that God does not love everyone. However, if we look closely at these people, we see elements of ourselves in them.

What is true of any man is true of all men; the only difference is in the degree to which it is true. Prophets and sanctified saints are the only exceptions to this universal truth. Jesus, peace be upon him, states, as recorded in al-Muwatta' of Imam Malik (d. 179/795):

*"Do not, like lords, look upon the faults of others. Rather, like servants, look after your own faults. In truth, humanity is comprised of only two types of people: the afflicted and the sound. So show mercy to the afflicted, and praise God for well-being."*

It is never the sinner that one should hate, but only the sin; for the essence of all humanity is a soul created in submission to its Creator. Whether that soul acknowledges this on a conscious level or not is a matter of grace, and this understanding enables us to look at others with compassion.

All people, everywhere and throughout time, suffer great tribulation at various points in their lives. At this very moment, hearts are breaking and lives are being shattered, women abused, children violated, and people dying while their loved ones are crying. Also at this very moment, other hearts are rejoicing, babies are being born, mothers are nurturing, smiles are given freely, charity is being distributed, and lovers are uniting.

The airport is one of the great metaphors of our time: sad, happy, and indifferent faces are all to be seen there, as people part with loved ones, greet their beloveds, or simply wait to pick up or let off people they barely know. Sad, happy, and indifferent are the states that sum up our collective body of souls. In the next life, however, there is only bliss or wretchedness, joy or sorrow-no indifference.

According to a beautiful hadith, the Prophet, God bless and grant him peace, said that on the Last Day, when the last two souls are brought forth before God, they are both condemned to hell. As the angels escort them to their final fiery abode, one of them wistfully looks back. Thereupon, God commands the angels to bring him back and asks the man why he turned back. The man replies, "I was expecting something else from you." God responds, commanding the angels, "Take him to My Garden."

It is our expectation of God that determines where we are. This points up the need for thinking well not only of God but also of God's creation, despite the fact that we are all messy, imperfect works in progress, struggling along in this journey.

We either surrender to God or to the substitutes for God, which are invariably hollow. But true love, which is the love of God, is the single most powerful force in the world. It is a love that "alters not when it alteration finds." It grows and never diminishes. If someone claims to have lost it, it can only be said that such a person did not have it to begin with. "It is the star to every wandering bark."

And in loving God, one must paradoxically love all of God's creation, merely for the incontrovertible fact that everything is God's creation. God does love everything in that He brought everything into existence from an act of divine love, and those who love God purely, and with the penetrating inner eye of reality, can only be a mercy while in the world. This does not mean that we love the evil that emanates from moral agents. In fact, it is an act of faith to loathe what is loathsome to God. So when God says He does not love oppressors, it is their oppression that we must loath.

In denying the humanity that is inherent in the oppressor, we miss the point and disallow the possibility that the door of God's mercy and love is open to everyone. If we truly believe that we love for everyone what we love for ourselves, then we should want everyone, no matter their state of being or their station in life, to enter that door of God's mercy and love, through repentance and contrition. Allowing for this possibility enables us to be a mercy, as the Prophet, God bless and grant him peace, was.

What follows is a profound explication of this truth by emir 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri (d. 1300/1883), perhaps the last exemplar of Islam on all the levels of prophetic character-as a teacher, warrior, statesman, father, and fully awakened master of the path of the prophets:

"They love God, and God loves them" (Qur'an, [5:54](#)). You should know that the love the real has for creation is of various kinds. One type is the divine love for them before they came into existence; and another is the divine love after they were created. These two types are further categorized into two other types: one is the divine love of the elect, and the other is the divine love of the elite of the elect.

As for the first [the divine love before creation], it permeates all of existence, despite the varieties of types, kinds, and characters. It is understood in the famous dictum known well to the folk of spirit, "I was a hidden treasure who loved to be known, so I created this creation to introduce Myself, and through it, they came to know Me." This love is the love that brought the world into existence: "I created humankind and sprites only to adore Me" ([51:56](#)).

In other words, "to know Me." This is the very love we have mentioned; it is God's inclination to manifest His divine names and attributes, and this is an inclination of the essential divine nature, which is not colored with a name or an attribute, because the names do not manifest at this level of consideration. Then, this inclination of divine love for self-expression extended itself through all of the divine names and sought to manifest through the epiphanies of the divine traces as they had been previously hidden in the divine essence, consumed in the divine unity. But once God created them, they knew God as God desired to be known, given that the divine will is unassailable.

Every type of creature knew God based upon the level of understanding and preparedness that God had bestowed upon it. As for the angels, each one is a type unto itself, and each has a station and rank, just as all the rest of creation has types and ranks.

None can either relinquish or surpass its rank, and their acceptance is predicated upon the degree of knowledge of God that they have. For without a doubt, they increased in their knowledge when Adam, peace be upon him, taught them the names, as the Exalted has taught us in the Qur'an.

As for inanimate objects, beasts, and animals other than humans, they have a natural disposition that entails a divine knowledge that neither increases nor decreases. Each of them also has a station, and it cannot exceed its boundaries of knowledge. As for the human being, he or she has a primordial knowledge that [although lost upon entering the world] can undergo a renovation. Its renovation is based upon the condition of his or her outward state; I mean by this the state of the soul and intellect.

For in reality, all of knowledge is concentrated in the individual's reality; it simply manifests from one time to another, based upon the divine will, because the human reality is contained in each person. And each human being, in that he or she is a human being, is open to the possibility of the rank of "perfected human." However, they will vary in the way their human perfection manifests itself in them.

As for the first type of divine love, which is that of the elect, this is reserved for only certain ones among God's servants. Examples of this are found in the Qur'an: "Surely God loves those who repent" ([2:222](#)). Also included among those God loves are those who purify themselves, the patient, the grateful, those who place their trust in God, those "who fight in ranks for the sake of God" ([61:4](#)), not to mention all the other beloveds God mentions in the Qur'an who have embodied certain qualities and characteristics that necessitate this special love from the Real, Exalted God.

Nonetheless, it is a type of love that veils and [yet] allows for a transcendent understanding of God. Moreover, it is a love that is unobtainable for certain types of people, as mentioned in the verses, "God loves not oppressors," ([3:57](#)), and "God loves not those who cover truth with lies" ([3:32](#)). Despite that, they are still enveloped in the first type of divine love [that is, divine love before they came into existence].

As for the second type of special divine love, it is for the elect of the elite; it is indicated in the sacred hadith,<sup>5</sup> "My servant continues to draw near unto Me through voluntary acts of devotion until I love him. And when I love him, I become the hearing with which he hears, the sight with which he sees, the hand with which he strikes, and the foot with which he walks. Were he to ask something of Me, I would assuredly grant it; were he to seek refuge in Me, I would grant it."

In other words, the identity of the Real is revealed to him as the secret of his own outward and inward faculties. This type of divine love occurs with an epiphany upon the beloved, the fruit of which is manifest in this world due to the divine witnessing and vision that occurs in the imaginal realm; or it occurs with other things also, as an effusion of experiential knowledge through myriad gifts.

As for the previous special type of love, it is still a veiled love, given that its possessor is still trapped in the illusion of otherness and duality. Hence, its fruits only manifest in the next world. For this reason, 'Ata' Allah (d.709/1309) says in his Aphorisms (al-Hikam), "The devoted servants and detached ones leave this world while their hearts are still filled with otherness."

This last love is attained only by those who possess the direct knowledge of God described in the sacred hadith above.

Furthermore, it is only attained by one who has in his or her heart that universal love for all of creation that is understood in the verse, "My Mercy encompasses all things" ([7:156](#)). It is the mercy that the Messenger of God, God bless and grant him peace, spoke of when he said, "you will not truly believe until you show mercy to one another."

To this, a companion responded, "But Messenger of God, all of us show mercy to others."

The Prophet, God bless and grant him peace, explained, "I am not speaking of the mercy one of you shows to his friend but of universal mercy-mercy to all of humanity."

Regarding the famous hadith, "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself," Imam al-Nawawi (d. 676/1277) states in his commentary that this love includes all of humanity. He further elucidates that it is a love that goes against our very nature; it is angelic in nature, and it is only obtained by negating the ego.

This struggle with the ego-with our own vengeful soul-is one of the most difficult challenges we face. But in succeeding in this struggle, we are not only able to forgive: we are also able to strike, when the only appropriate response is a strike-but with the hand of God, not with the hand of our own ego because it is an undeniable reality of the world that miscreants exist, that there are human demons whose evil must be thwarted.

This is the essence of jihad: to take up the sword in order to remove the sword from the hands of those who wish to do evil in the world. However, the mujahid must be purified from his own ego so he can act as an agent of the divine in the world.

This was the reality of the Prophet, God bless and grant him peace, on the battlefield, about whom God said, "And when you threw, you did not throw, but rather God threw" ([8:17](#)). It is only such people who are worthy of being the caliphs of God upon the earth. They are the ones God will empower to rule. And for those who do not possess these qualities but still have the love of God, God's greatest gift is to leave them powerless.

God's privation is itself a gift, for He withholds not from want but from wisdom.

### ***Remembering the Dead***

The Prophet, peace be upon him, has strongly recommended that the dead should be remembered only for their virtues and not for their failings. The seriousness of this type of insult is emphasised by the fact that the dead are unable to defend themselves against attacks on their personal integrity and good name. The Prophet has thus instructed the Muslims to **'mention only the virtues of your deceased ones and avoid talking about their misdeeds'**. [Mishkat]

In yet another Hadith he directs the believers to **'avoid reviling the dead as, by doing so, you hurt the feelings of their living relatives'**. [Mishkat]

To relate all this to the moral character of the believer, the Prophet has elsewhere declared that the avoidance of insulting others is indicative of the strength of one's character and faith. **'The believer is not abusive, nor is he a slanderer, nor does he curse.'** [Mishkat]

