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## Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Love of God

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## Muslim Response to the Annual Spring McGinley Lecture

**Amir Hussain, Ph.D.**

*Al-salaamu alaikum.* Greetings and good evening. My thanks to Father Patrick Ryan for inviting me back here to Fordham to be with you again to give a brief response to his wonderful McGinley Lecture. My thanks also to Patricia Bellucci for her help with the arrangements, to Professors Anne Hoffman and Judith Kubicki for moderating our conversations, and to Professor Sarit Kattan Gribetz for her response. My thanks to all of you who are reading this printed version of the lecture and responses. As I was preparing to come to New York City, I got the news that my friend and colleague, LMU New Testament scholar David Sanchez, had passed away suddenly and unexpectedly on Saturday, April 6 from a heart attack. David did his Ph.D. at Union Theological Seminary, and so although he was an Angeleno, New York City was an important place for him. I offer my remarks to you in memory of my friend, and I would ask those of you who pray to remember David and his daughters Isabella and Maya in

your prayers. “Ring the bells that still can ring,” Rabbi Eliezer taught us in his incarnation as the blessed Leonard Cohen through his song “Anthem,” “forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

As is usual with Father Ryan, his lecture is magisterial. It brought me back to the last conference paper I gave as a graduate student, in 1994, a few years before I moved from Toronto to Los Angeles. It was entitled “*Hubb, Wadda and Rahmah* in North American Islam,” and presented at a conference in honour of two of my mentors, William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata who teach at SUNY Stony Brook on Long Island. *Hubb, Wadda, and Rahmah* are the three terms used in the Qur’an for “love”. Father Ryan focused on the term “Rahmah,” and I will return to that. It is important to focus on love, especially in a world where so many people do not associate that term with Islam or Muslims.

I particularly appreciated his opening section on the spirituality of the Zohar, and the connection of that to the mystical traditions within Islam. And in the section on Christianity, his discussion of God being neither male nor female echoes the Qur’an and Islamic thought. *Surat al-Ikhlās*, the 112th chapter of the Qur’an, begins with the line “*qul: huwa Allahu ahad*”, or “Say: God is one,” which of course echoes the first line of the *Shema*. And the short chapter ends with the 4th verse, “*wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad*,” “No one is comparable to God.”

In the discussion of Islamic mysticism, I was reminded of Father Ryan’s teacher, the blessed Annemarie Schimmel. I met her only once, almost 30 years ago, in June of 1990 for a conference at Hartford Seminary in honor of the retirement of Willem Bijlefeld. There she gave a paper on her beloved Rumi, “Jesus and Mary as Poetical Images in Rumi’s Verse,” which was included in the collection of papers edited by Yvonne and Wadi Haddad entitled *Christian-Muslim Encounters*. In her talk, Prof. Schimmel mentioned a story from Rumi’s masterpiece, the *Mathnawi*, concerning “the answer Jesus gave to someone who asked him: ‘What is the heaviest

thing in the world?’ He answered: ‘God’s wrath.’ Asked how to find rescue from this Divine wrath he replied: ‘Suppress your own wrath and oppress your own anger.’”<sup>1</sup> I think about that more and more these days, when anger seems to have become our national emotion in this country.

And although Father Ryan does not mention it, I think it important to talk about homosexuality as well as heterosexuality. Again in our current climate, we are in a dangerous place for those who are not heterosexual. I think of Muslim psychologists who worry about losing their license if they are anything but heteronormative, and I wonder how we got to that place where we can hate people for the love that God has put between them. I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto during the Plague Years, where I went to too many funerals of my beautiful friends who died of HIV/AIDS. We have to speak out when our gay, lesbian, queer, trans, and bisexual brothers and sisters are threatened. We have to lift up the work and voices of LGBTQ scholars and activists such as Scott Kugle at Emory University, who reminds us of the inherent dignity of all of us, regardless of our sexuality. Here, I think again of Rumi, this time writing one of his most famous *ghazals* in the *Diwan*. This is written in Farsi, not Arabic, so the gender cues aren’t explicit in the text. One doesn’t know if this is a male speaking to a male, to a female, or if it is a female speaker. It’s a poem that Jack Miles quotes in his new book, *God in the Qur’an*, which comes to the surprising conclusion that in some stories of the prophets that are shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, God is sometimes more merciful in the Qur’an than God is in the Bible. It’s the mercy that Fr. Ryan spoke of as God’s *rahmah* in the Qur’an, where the names most used for God are Al-Rahman and Al-Rahim, the Merciful and the Compassionate. Both words have their root in the Arabic word *rahm* or womb. The analogy is clear, what could be more merciful than the mother’s womb, which shelters her child for nine months. It is also a delightful and surprising feminine image of the divine.

I close with Rumi’s *ghazal*, translated by William Chittick, who is my favorite translator of Rumi. It is a perfect representation of love, and the

power of love, in the Islamic tradition. In it, Rumi tells the Quranic stories of Jesus and of Joseph (one of the sons of Jacob), specifically some of the miracles of Jesus, and how the scent of Joseph on his cloak gives eyesight back to his father, Jacob, who has been blinded with grief from weeping for the son he thinks is lost forever:

If anyone asks you about *houris* [heavenly lovers],  
show your face and say, “Like this.”

If anyone speaks to you about the moon, rise up beyond  
the roof and say, “Like this.”

When someone looks for a fairy princess, show your face to him.  
When someone talks of musk, let loose your tresses and say,  
“Like this.”

If someone says to you, “How do clouds part from the moon?”  
Undo your robe, button by button, and say, “Like this.”

If he asks you about the Messiah, “How could he bring the dead  
to life?”

Kiss my lips before him and say, “Like this.”

When someone says, “Tell me, what does it mean to be  
killed by love?”

Show my soul to him and say, “Like this.”

If someone in concern asks you about my state,

Show him your eyebrow, bent over double, and say, “Like this.”

The spirit breaks away from the body, then again it enters within.

Come, show the deniers, enter the house and say, “Like this.”

In whatever direction you hear the complaint of a lover,

That is my story, all of it, by God, like this.

I am the house of every angel, my breast has turned blue  
like the sky—

Lift up your eyes and look with joy at heaven, like this.

I told the secret of union with the Beloved to the east wind alone.

Then, through the purity of its own mystery, the east wind  
whispered, “Like this.”

Those are blind who say, "How can the servant reach God?"  
Place the candle of purity in the hand of each and say, "Like this."  
I said, "How can the fragrance of Joseph go from one city to  
the next?"  
The fragrance of God blew from the world of his Essence and  
said, "Like this."  
I said, "How can the fragrance of Joseph give sight back to  
the blind?"  
Your breeze came and gave light to my eye: "Like this."  
Perhaps Shams al-Din in Tabriz will show his generosity, and in  
his kindness display his good faith, like this.<sup>2</sup>

Thank you!

## NOTES

- 1 Annemarie Schimmel, "Jesus and Mary as Poetical Images in Rumi's Verse", in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Zaidan Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 143-144.
- 2 Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Diwan*, *ghazal* #1826, trans. by William C. Chittick in *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 72-73.

## AMIR HUSSAIN, PH.D.

Amir Hussain is a professor in the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, where he teaches courses on world religions. His specialty is the study of Islam, focusing on contemporary Muslim societies.

A native of Pakistan, Hussain immigrated to Canada when he was 4 years old. He earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at the University of Toronto, where he received a number of awards, including the university's highest honor for alumni service. His doctoral dissertation was on Muslim communities in Toronto. Since September 11, 2001, he has appeared on the History Channel numerous times and has provided insight into Islam for many newspapers and magazines in both the United States and Canada.

Dr. Hussain was the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and serves on the editorial board of many journals, including *Comparative Islamic Studies*; *The Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace*; and *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*.

He also is part of the research network for the Islam and Human Rights Fellowship Program at Emory University. His latest publication is the textbook *World Religions: Western Traditions*, third edition for (Oxford University Press).