"God Loves Me": The Theological Content and Context of Early Pious and Sufi Women's Sayings on Love[1]

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Sufi sayings on divine love are expressed as deeply personal revelations of intimate experiences with the object of their attachment. However, no matter how personal an expression of such intimacy may be, when it is communicated, the lover's expression is constrained by the language and culture of her or his day. Maria Dakake has found that [pious and] Sufi women from the seventh to the thirteenth century shared a common language of domesticity in describing their intimacy with God. In her article, "Guest of the Inmost Heart," Dakake argues convincingly that common gendered social constraints have resulted in an articulation of women's experience of divine love in a language of domesticity:

> While, in many ways, the devotional attitudes of Sufi women are similar to those reported of Sufi men, the words attributed by early Sufi women suggest that they developed their own image of the divine Beloved as both gentle and strong, fiercely jealous and disarmingly intimate, and metaphorically conceptualized as the masculine object of their female longing. At the same time, descriptions of their spiritual relationship with the Beloved tend to be less exotic

and more "domesticated" than those we find commonly attributed to Sufi men. Rather than conceiving of their souls as lovers journeying in quest of an elusive *rendez-vous* with the Beloved, they more frequently imagined their souls as faithful lovers who enjoyed regular or even constant states of intimacy with God.[2]

Dakake is making a subtle and significant point. Devotional attitudes of women and men are typically similar to one another. For instance, women and men alike long for intimacy with God, seek solitude for worship away from their worldly responsibilities, take God as their only protector, see themselves as chosen by God, and are pleased with God's jealousy for their attention.[3] Dakake points out that despite these similarities, social boundaries produced a distinctly gendered inflection in the way women and men speak about their intimate relationship with God. In keeping with gender and sexuality norms, women typically talk about their guardian lover, while men talk about a lover who will be unveiled with the hope of achieving union.[4] I think Dakake's distinction will stand over time, but to do so it must be refined. I hope to open up Dakake's definition to take into account patriarchal gender norms—especially in terms of "domesticity"—embedded in the theological debates of the day.

   Dakake's work covers a lengthy period that stretches from early Muslim piety in the seventh and eighth centuries, through the rise of Sufism in the early ninth century, and well into the period of the establishment of Sufi orders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Each of these transitions represent major shifts in Islamic theology, Sufi thought, and devotional practices. As Joseph Lumbard has shown, what Sufis meant by divine love in the eighth century is a distant relative to their understanding of it in the twelfth century. Early pietists, and later the first Sufis, argued about the nature of love as a divine attribute, and whether or not it is possible for God to reciprocate human love. But by the twelfth century, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. ca. 517/1123), the brother of the famous Imam Ghazālī (d. 505/1111),

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[2]   Maria Dakake, 'Guest of the Inmost Heart: Conceptions of the Divine Beloved among Early Sufi Women,' *Comparative Islamic Studies,* 3, 1, 2007, 72.

[3]   Ibid., 76-78.

[4]   Ibid., 82-83, 75.

will name love as the ontological ground of creation itself.[5] It is significant that Dakake was able to trace a similarly inflected language through such changes, thus demonstrating the power of gender norms over the lives of women in Muslim societies that place women's primary social centre in the home. For Dakake, this particular mode of expression marks a real difference between male and female interiorising paths.[6] However, once we move away from this overarching observation to examine women in specific times and places the picture becomes considerably more complex. Indeed, we begin to find significant points of incongruity that break up the uniformity of her narrative depicting women's inward turn and devotional lives, and that offer some insight into the relationship between popular and elite theologies. In this article, I will give a preliminary account of this relationship by examining women's understanding of divine love within a specific historico-theological context: seventh century piety in the generations after the Prophet through the rise of Sufism in Baghdad and surrounding areas up to the tenth century.[7]

Working with Biographical Sources

The *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* of Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) is the most comprehensive collection of reports of women available to us at this time.[8] He collected and transmitted reports of pious and Sufi women from the known earlier sources ranging from Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* to Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's *Dhikr an-niswa*.[9] Unfortunately, we cannot treat the

[5] Joseph Lumbard, 'From Ḥubb to ʿIshq: The Development of Love in Early Sufism,' *Journal of Islamic Studies,* 18, 3, 2007).

[6] Dakake, 'Guest,' 83, 89.

[7] This article contains selections from my work in progress *Simply Good Women: The Lives, Practices, and Thought of Early Pious and Sufi Women.*

[8] Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), 363. Ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* will be cited by entry-number. Where there is overlap with Rkia Cornell's translations of the reports in Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's *Dhikr an-niswa,* I will rely on her translation (Rkia Cornell, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt aṣ-ṣufiyyāt* [Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 1999]). Otherwise, the translations are from the companion work to *Simply Good Women* written with Ahmed Elewa (in progress): *Simply Good Women: Biographies of Women in Ibn al-Jawzi's Sifat al-safwa.*

[9] I have also consulted the available early sources. See Ruth Roded's groundbreaking study on women in Islamic biographical collections for a list of the (scant) earlier biographical sources as well as an account and analysis of their contents (Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* [Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1994]).

reports of these women as uncomplicated repositories of historical data, but neither should we dismiss them as narratives that mainly give us information about the historical and social situations of the collectors or transmitters. The middle ground is discovered through historical-critical research, literary and textual analysis, and understanding the methods, goals, and worlds of the collectors and transmitters. Add to that a dose of common sense, and one is left with reports about pious and Sufi women that are sufficiently representative of their lives, practices, and concerns for evaluation.

In keeping with the genealogical method of the day, Ibn al-Jawzī was of the mind that one should collect everything.[10] In the *Ṣifat*, he brought together reports of the pious and Sufis, transmitting them without explicit comment, even though in other texts he will use that same material to criticise their positions and even try to destroy their reputations.[11] He seems to have collected and relayed almost every scrap of news about women that others considered pious in their day.[12] For Ibn al-Jawzī, the story of a little girl who makes a surprising and insightful comment about God's dislike of acquiring wealth is as valuable as the stories of such exceptional women as Fāṭima of Nishapur.[13] However, this is not the case with other scholars, especially the Sufis themselves, who purposefully dropped the reports of women other than those of the Prophet's wives, female companions, and near legendary women like Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. ca. 184/801).[14] Ibn al-Jawzī openly criticises these scholars for leaving

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[10]   Scholars collected reports of the pious in the same manner that *ḥadith* scholars pursued reports about the Prophet and his companions. See Rkia Cornell's discussion of biographical literature and its relationship to *ḥadith* literature (Cornell, *Early Sufi Women,* 48-53).

[11]   See Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs iblīs* (Cairo: Maktaba Usāma al-Islāmiyya, n.d.).

[12]   There are some lacunae that may be due to different manuscripts of Sulamī's *Dhikr* and/or Ibn al-Jawzī's own editorial choices. See Cornell, who argues for editorial changes (Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 46, 61-62).

[13]   Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 1028, 688.

[14]   Roded, *Women*, 92-3. In *Simply Good Women*, I will extend Roded and Cornell's discussion of the absence of women from Sufi biographical collections. These women's names were not just dropped from biographical collections: a number of transmitters also edited women's stories to shift a male Sufi to the center of the narrative and pushed a now *unknown* woman to the margins

women out.[15] He did not complain out of some proto-feminist inclination nor did his inclusion of women's lives in the *Ṣifat* reflect his approval of them. One needs only to lightly scan his book *Kitāb aḥkām al-nisāʾ* to get a fine sense of his misogyny.[16]

Even if we suppose that Ibn al-Jawzī collected and relayed the reports without excessive editorialising, we cannot say the same for all the transmitters. In his book on the early "ascetic" Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), Suleiman Mourad offers a lucid and cautionary analysis of the ways biographical material is transformed in keeping with theological, political, and social exigencies.[17] Taking his observations into account, we are left with reports of women that are more likely to reflect the concerns of their transmitters than their own historical realities. That said, however, the

to play a supporting role. I believe that early pious and Sufi women are left out, or their identities disappear in these reports, for the same reason the second generation of female *ḥadīth* transmitters become absent from *ḥadīth* transmissions. As Asma Sayeed and Mohammad Akram Nadwi point out, women became superfluous in the transmission of knowledge with the growing emphasis on travel in seeking out reliable transmitters and short chains of narration. Women were no longer necessary to transmit the reports as the number of male transmitters with the same set of reports grew. In particular, Sayeed argues that, with the exception of women such as ʿĀʾisha and Umm Salama, male transmitters were suspicious of *ḥadīth* transmitted by women and preferred that narrations come through men. In the Sufi context, then, it begins to make sense that only significant women such as Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya and the women of the Prophet's community continued to be mentioned in the reports. These women are so embedded in the transmission of interiorizing knowledge that leaving them out would break the chain of authority itself. But the other women's transmissions were no longer necessary for the preservation of knowledge. By their own accounts, Sulamī and Ibn al-Jawzī intended their works to redress the erasure of women from the transmission of knowledge (see Cornell, *Early Sufi Women,* 15-17; Asma Sayeed, '*Shifting Fortunes: Women and Ḥadith Transmission in Islamic History [First to Eighth Centuries]*' [PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2005], 219; Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* [Oxford: Interface, 2007], 251-252).

[15]   See his criticism of Abū Nuʿaym's multi-volume biographical collection *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ* for leaving out all but a few reports of women (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 14).

[16]   Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb aḥkām al-nisāʾ* (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 1980).

[17]   See Suleiman Mourad's discussion of the ideological adoption of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī by the Sufis in *Early Islam between Myth and History: Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of his Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006). Likewise see Jawid A. Mojaddedi's discussion of similar points in *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The ṭabaqāt genre from al-Sulamī to Jamī* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001).

lives and voices of the women are not lost. They can be recovered—to some degree—in the sources we have at hand by looking for throwaway, mundane, and incongruous material that gives the reader a sense of verisimilitude. Evidence from unrelated historical works can also corroborate the details or social patterns in an account. But as I will discuss in four cases below, sometimes these details are so taken up in service of a polemic that they significantly obscure the person behind the story. Keeping the above observations in mind, I will examine the following reports as mediated transmissions of the women's voices for their theological content and context, including their polemical value.[18]

The Theological Context of the Reports

In the formative period, theological discourse was not positioned as a scholarly effort divorced from popular concerns about the nature of God. The first "properly theological dispute" of the Muslim community developed out of popular political divisions rooted in the question of human responsibility for sin.[19] Falling along political lines, the argument for the efficacy of human actions was centred in Basra and regions where there were a large concentration of Khārijīs, Ibāḍīs, and other political dissenters who rejected quietism because their actions mattered, and, more importantly, so did those of the Caliph they challenged. The various notions of predestination were centred in Ahl al-Ḥadīth strongholds such as Mecca, Medina, and Baghdad where quietism was generally promoted as the mark of a unified community of believers, and the political order was increasingly perceived as the will of God.[20]

[18] As with the trend in ḥadīth studies, academic work on biographical sources seems to be moving away from a radical skepticism in which all reports are treated as constructions out of whole cloth. See Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), ch. 8, especially 134-135.

[19] Khalid Blankinship, 'The Early Creed,' in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 39. See also Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present,* trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2000), 37ff.

[20] On politics and theology in this period see ch. 2 of Nagel's *The History of Islamic Theology,* op. cit. I use the term Ahl al-Ḥadīth in the most general terms to refer to those who constructed a notion of authority, right conduct, and faith as ineluctably rooted in provenance reaching back to the Prophet's community. The Ahl al-Ḥadīth represent an enormous breadth of interpretive methods and theological positions but shared a similar vision of provenance and, as will be noted, of God's encompassing command over His creation.

Correspondingly, the Basran tradition was more comfortable laying claim to a rationalist tradition rooted in an Islamicised Aristotelian logic that promoted human agency, whereas the scholars of the broader Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition saw themselves as preservers of the Prophetic way that stressed the rights of God first.[21] Sherman Jackson calls these different theological perspectives "regimes of sense."[22] The term nicely captures the socio-political elements at play in thinking about God; but, more so, it captures the idea that theologies are authoritative worldviews which construct the limits of human understanding of God, the human self, and the world.

The difference of opinion on the efficacy of human actions was premised on one's understanding of the scope of influence of divine attributes.[23] In the Qur'an, God is described as being both entirely transcendent from creation and yet also similar to it, in some way, through His attributes, which the Qur'an associates with His most beautiful names (*asmāʾ allāh al-ḥusnā*) such as the all-Powerful, the all Knowing, the Just, and the Loving.[24] If one upheld the notion that human beings are the creators of their own actions, then one must limit God's power in some way to account for human independence and interest. As far back as the Khārijīs, the Basran tradition tended to prioritise the influence of the attributes in favour of independent human action. The Qadarīs—including the moderate Qadarī

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[21]   Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 40-42. These particular regional generalizations hold *to some degree* in the formative period probably because of their relationship to political positioning rooted in the various cities. But the regional characterizations should not be taken too far. There were Muʿtazilīs everywhere, most especially in Baghdad, just as there were Ahl al-Ḥadīth oriented scholars in Basra. I use them here to serve as *a heuristic device to highlight the necessity of paying attention to the historico-theological elements in the women's sayings.* A more detailed study of women and men's sayings in these different regions would most likely produce a more nuanced reflection of the different theological impulses in these cities, but that is outside the purview of this article. For a cogent analysis demonstrating the need to take care with regional divisions, see Christopher Melchert's work placing the Ḥanafī's+ origin in Medina rather than Kufa as a result of Muʿtazilī theological propaganda (Christopher Melchert, 'How Hanafism Came to Originate in Kufa and Traditionalism in Medina,' *Islamic Law and Society,* 6, 3, 1999, pp. 318-47).

[22]   Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 10.

[23]   Blankinship, 'The Early Creed,' 39; and Nader al-Bizri, 'God: Essence and Attributes' in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, op. cit., 128-129.

[24]   Al-Bizri, 'God: Essence and Attributes,' 124-127.

and famous preacher al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī—argued that while God knows all things, that knowledge is not predetermining.[25] However, if one promoted God's creative power over the possibility of human independence, then one must posit that the attributes are delimited by God in accordance with His interests alone.[26] Ahl al-Ḥadīth-oriented scholars, no matter what their method of interpretation, upheld that God is the possessor of all and the creator of all, including human actions.[27]

The Muʿtazilīs advanced on the early Basran trend by further limiting God's attributes to account for their notions of God's justice and the efficacy of human actions. The Muʿtazilīs were loath to associate any ontological reality to the attributes in the fear that, in doing so, they would qualify divine transcendence. Thus they ascribed attributes such as power, will, and knowing, to the essence, and declared other attributes, such as love, created or subordinate to it. In this way of thinking, the attributes were merely descriptions or metaphors and the Muʿtazilīs were able to preserve divine transcendence by limiting what one could positively say about God.[28] In other words, the linguistic limitations of what can be said about God tell us something about who God is and what God can do. When God declares Himself to be utterly just, He is constrained by that declaration. Thus, God is bound to do what He says He will do. Jackson describes these limitations in terms of priority. For the Muʿtazilīs, God's

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[25]   Blankinship, 'The Early Creed,' 39. See Suleiman Mourad's chapter on Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's Qadarism, 'Al-Ḥasan and the Qadar Controversy,' in *Early Islam between Myth and History,* op. cit.

[26]   Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 77.

[27]   From the early Murjiʾa, then the Ḥanbalīs, Ḥanafīs and others, on to the Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs, God was understood to have ultimate power and control no matter the degree of responsibility or effectiveness each theological community accorded human beings and their actions (for examples see ch. 5 of Nagel's *The History of Islamic Theology,* op. cit.). Jackson redirects our attention away from pitting rationality against tradition. As he puts it, the rationalists and traditionalists were using different "constructions of reason" (Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 40-42). For a different and necessary outlook on the reticulate theological associations of this period, see Christopher Melchert, 'The Adversaries of Ahmed ibn Hanbal,' *Arabica,* 44, 2, April 1997, pp. 234-253.

[28]   Richard Frank, 'Background and Evolution of the Concept of the Attributes,' in *Beings and their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Muʿtazila in the Classical Period* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1978). See also his article 'Several Fundamental Assumptions of the Basra School of Mutazila,' *Studia Islamica,* 33, 1971, pp. 5-18.

oneness and justice dominated. If God's will is first and foremost defined by His justice towards humanity, then it must be enacted in accordance with human interest. God cannot be responsible for evil and must reward good human actions or there is some defect in His justice.[29]

For Ahl al-Ḥadīth-oriented theologians, God's attributes, such as knowledge and will, had priority; and thus, in their regime of sense, justice is a top-down affair. God is certainly just toward humanity, but He is not constrained to enact that justice in accordance with its interests. Justice is defined by God's interests alone; and He does what He wills. The majority of Muslims in this period—from the early Zubayrids and Murjiʾa to later Ahl al-Ḥadīth-oriented scholars (and some Shia)—disagreed strongly that human actions had any efficacy apart from God or that God was compelled to act in any way other than in His own interest. Blankinship writes,

> The Sunni Traditionalists also objected to the Muʿtazilite concept of human free will, which seemed to compromise God's majesty, power and sovereign freedom. The mechanistic image of a deity constrained by his own laws and incapable of true mercy because of the demand for the absolute mathematical requital of deeds appalled them likewise. For the traditionalists, God had ultimate power to will every event and act, in effect overriding His other attributes, such as His justice, which the Muʿtazila said must constrain the divine agency.[30]

In keeping with a limited human understanding of God's affairs, one affirms the ontological reality of the attributes but declines to speculate on their modality. One may speculate, though, on the nature of the attributes and the specific ways in which God interacts with human beings through them. The scholars typically distinguished between God's essential and performative attributes. Linguistic considerations came into play here as well: God's attributes that have no possible opposite term have priority with regard to the essence and as such encompass the other divine

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[29] Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 52. Like Ahl al-Ḥadīth scholars, individual Muʿtazilīs took an extraordinary array of theological positions (for example, see Nagel, *History*, 105 ff).

[30] Blankinship, 'The Early Creed,' 52.

attributes.[31] The attributes of the essence, such as power, life, and will, have no opposite. No one can say that God is weak, dead, or ineffective. But one can posit opposites to the performative attributes. One can say that while God has the power to forgive and create, He need not forgive certain people or create certain things. Of particular importance to the subject of this paper, one could say that while God has the power to love, He need not love all things.[32]

Early perspectives on the efficacy of human actions provided the theological ground for piety in Basra and its environs. Basra was known for its paths of renunciation and weeping out of doubt that a pietist's works would be acceptable to God.[33] Only one who can claim to be the creator of her or his own acts worries what effect her or his works will have on God. Blankinship directly links this theological perspective to Basran pietists. He writes, "Pietists tended to worry about whether their actions were acceptable to God, and whether they could not do better by increasing their efforts to live in a way pleasing to Him."[34] Dakake reminds us here—in keeping with the Basran traditionists' regime of sense—that while some wept, other pietists were confident that their efforts were pleasing to Him and would be rewarded as a result.

The Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition's regime of sense giving priority to God's unconstrained power likewise provided the theological ground for early Ahl al-Ḥadīth piety and the interiorising path called "Sufism" developing in and around Baghdad in the third/ninth century.[35] For the early Sufis, the emphasis was on God's rights over those of human beings, meaning giving up a sense of self-determination and giving over to His lordship. They were not slavish determinists; they believed their actions had

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[31]   Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 43-4. Ḥanbalī Ahl al-Ḥadīth scholars reduced the attributes to the essence in an attempt to veil them from any discussion about their nature, but the upshot—handing God all power—is the same (Nader al-Bizri, 'God: Essence and Attributes,' 124-127).

[32]   Ultimately, the Ashʿarīs will say that everything God wills does not necessarily reflect His pleasure (Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 137). See the discussion of chosenness and God's love below.

[33]   "Baṣrā," *EI2*. See the mention of the Basran weepers below.

[34]   Blankinship, 'The Early Creed,' 39.

[35]   I am taking into account the proto-Sufis of Basra (Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 38-43. Again, no geographic boundary is exacting in its differences. On early theological trends in that region, see Jackson, *Black Suffering*, ch. 4.

repercussions and had an effect on how God interacted with them. For instance, God turns toward one when one chooses to turn toward God. But at root that choice to turn belongs to God, not to the human being.

Both the Basran and Ahl al-Ḥadīth traditions were concerned with the problem of anthropomorphism, a real risk when making sense of a revelation that seems to say that God has attributes that are undeniably similar to those of human beings. Consider the difficulty when speaking about God's love. How is it that God loves? For the Muʿtazilīs, affective attributes such as love are metaphors for or descriptions of His essential will. God loves only as a function of His will or justice. For instance, when the Qur'an says that God loves those who do good, it is, in truth, a way of talking about how God must reward good deeds. In this odd way, God's love (i.e., His will or justice) could be said to be reciprocal for human actions. But it certainly has no emotional value. God's love is not a feeling that wells up in Him as a result of His pleasure over good works. Likewise for the early Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition, God's love is entirely unlike human love; it is passionless, serene, and connected to His acceptance of good works.[36] But unlike the Basran tradition, God's love is not reciprocal in the sense that human beings cannot initiate God's love of them. The Ahl al-Ḥadīth argued that God, as the creator and possessor of their actions, selected them for good works, and thus for His love, in pre-eternity, typically citing the verse in the Qur'an, "He loves them [first] and they love Him [second]" (Q 5:59).[37] While the emphasis was most certainly on God's rights over human concerns in the early period, this attitude was in transition. Even then, there were inward-turning Muslims here and there who claimed a passionate and reciprocal love of God (*ʿishq*).[38]

Early Pious and Sufi Women on Love

In the reports, women spoke eloquently of loving God, but did not explicitly state, 'God loves me'.[39] Although Dakake does not make this

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[36]   In the Qur'an, God seems to love particular people or actions, such as "those who do good" (see 2:195 and some twenty other verses). In contrast, "God does not love those who do wrong" (3:57 and some twenty other verses).

[37]   For more examples of this verse used to prove God's priority in initiating love, see Dakake, 'Guests,' 77, 91n11 and n12.

[38]   Lumbard, 'From Ḥubb to ʿIshq.'

[39]   See my discussion below where I argue that the majority of the reports in which women say 'By Your love for me' are polemical constructions.

(important) distinction, I agree with her that the reports typically show women expressing God's love in terms of intimacy with Him and His acceptance of their works. As Dakake observes, many women expressed love as confidence that their protector would accept their works and return to intimacy with them during their time spent alone in worship. For Dakake, this confidence in God's love was the mark of the domestic perspective on female spirituality. She writes,

> One of the most striking features of early female Sufi discourse is the tremendous confidence many of these women had both in God's love for them, and in the rewards they could expect for their devotion to Him. While there are some examples of women weeping over their own moral unworthiness and their desire for God, it is at least as common to find Sufi women expressing certainty in their relationship with God, and a pronounced confidence that God has chosen them for His love, and that He loves them as they love Him.[40]

Although Dakake readily acknowledges that there are reports of women who wept out of worry and doubt, it seems that only relationships marked by confidence fit her characterisation of a domestic relationship with God.[41] Taken on these terms, the domestic perspective seems to embody a happy version of the patriarchal ideal in which God plays the role of the male guardian who protects, comforts, consoles, and shares in intimacy with His obedient and loving servant. His lover responds to His guardianship over her with gratitude and feels certain of His love. However, Dakake's characterisation makes it difficult to acknowledge that the domestic perspective on God might also be marked by weeping and worry. More the problem, it makes it that much harder to acknowledge that—with all the complexity that comes with human existence—these women are reported

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[40] Dakake, 'Guest,' 7.
[41] To be fair, Dakake and I sometimes read the sources differently, which then leads to the differences of opinion I present here. In many cases these are truly matters of judgment, not fact. Aside from the women that she excludes from the domestic picture due to their weeping and doubt, she reads some reports as confident that I read as emotionally fraught. I also read some sayings as outright polemic that she reads as more straightforward accounts of women's voices.

to have found inward fulfilment in these more emotionally fraught domestic scenes.

An explicit example of the patriarchal ideal of the male guardian is found in verse 4:34 of the Qur'an, and has served as a social and legal model for male-female relations since the formative period.

> Men are guardians over women, according to what God has favoured some over others and according to what they spend from their wealth. Righteous women are obedient, protecting what goes unseen according to what God has protected. Those [women] whose rebelliousness you fear, admonish them, and abandon them in bed, and beat them. If they obey you, do not pursue a strategy against them. Indeed, God is Exalted, Great.

In this verse, men are instructed that they are guardians (*qawwāmūn*) over women and to recognise righteous women by their obedience. As guardians, if men find that their wives have become rebellious, men are instructed to first speak to their wives about it, then, if necessary, withdraw from intimacy with them, and if that does not work, punish their wives by separating from them entirely or beating them until they are obedient.[42] I would argue that there is an intentional correspondence being made in the reports between this patriarchal social order and the divine order.[43] The reports seem to positively value this ideal in the full range of the guardian's role, meaning not only in comforting terms that fit a contemporary idealisation of patriarchy. It is not clear whether this correspondence in the reports is an account of patriarchal social norms conditioning women's

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[42] This understanding of male guardianship (i.e., dominion) is established early on in the Muslim community, is culturally widespread, and codified in law. See Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 117-125. Also see her book *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* in which she demonstrates the legal and cultural relationship between marriage and slavery (Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), *passim*, 179.

[43] Sachiko Murata has demonstrated that in the Islamic intellectual tradition, the connection between divine cosmology and idealized patriarchal gender roles in marriage is made intentionally. In particular, see her chapters 'Macrocosmic Marriage' and 'Human Marriage' in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

experience of God, or a record of the transmitters' concern to enforce gender norms, or both. Common sense suggests the latter.[44]

The reports tell a story of women's attachment and devotion to God as their guardian and protector in ways that seem to match a broader experience of worldly domestic relations, which include experiences of confidence in God's love as well as worry and doubt. Perhaps indicating some women's disinterest in human marriage at all, some women devote themselves solely to God because no earthly man, including the Prophet Muhammad, could provide and care for them as He does.[45] Other women are married but prefer God in their inmost heart.[46] Some women describe obedience to Him as the highest expression of their love.[47] But not all women imagine God's guardianship in terms that suit a positive spin on patriarchy. In keeping with a more encompassing representation of women's experience and expectations of male guardianship, other women weep or worry that God will not accept their devotion and thus withhold His intimacy from them. Ḥabība al-ʿAdawiyya from Basra waits all night for God while pledging her constant devotion, but God does not readily reciprocate her love with intimacy.[48] Burda of Basra longs for God in a state of passionate uncertainty, fearing that He may not return to a state of intimacy with her. She implores Him, "Will you torture me while your love is in my heart? Don't do it, my love!"[49] In this patriarchal regime of sense, expressions of uncertainty and suffering are no less domestic, nor

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[44] Kecia Ali discusses some reports in the early period in which women seem to object to the patriarchal model of male dominion over women, but she shows that they are, in actuality, not objecting to patriarchy itself but rather suggesting mere role reversals (Ali, *Marriage*, 186).

[45] Dakake, 'Guest,' 77. Note that this sort of refusal to marry does not threaten the patriarchal order because she is still subject to "male" guardianship (Aisha Geissinger, personal conversation, 2010).

[46] Dakake, 'Guest,' 81. The connection between obedience and love of God is hardly alien to male Sufis, but we must note that for women who are slaves, servants, wives, and daughters the idea that one's proper role with respect to one's guardian is obedience resonates with certain social realities for women. Note, too, that there is a tradition of Sufi men saying that they need to be more like "women," i.e., submissive to their Lord (Laury Silvers, "Images of Sex and Gender in Sufism," in *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* [Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007]).

[48] Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 202. Ḥabība lived in the second/eighth century.

[49] Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat,* 596. Burda lived during the first/seventh or second/eighth centuries.

less fulfilling. The famous Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya remarks that God inflicted her with disease out of jealousy that her attention had strayed from him.[50] As Dakake points out, jealousy in men was highly valued, and thus women who suffered under God's jealousy did not articulate their suffering in negative terms. On the contrary, they felt they deserved it, were pleased by it, and it became inspiration for their increased "warm devotion."[51]

We should also open Dakake's characterisation of a distinctly feminine interiorising path to take into account their complex engagement with their theological milieu. The reader will have noticed at this point that the domestic perspective on God is decidedly anthropomorphic in tone, if not also in meaning. I disagree with Dakake that the reports' depiction of God as their protecting lover was entirely "metaphorical."[52] We should expect to see anthropomorphism in these reports.[53] If the mutual criticisms and accusations of the various schools of theology are to be believed, different modes of anthropomorphism were rife even in the work of theologians themselves, as well as among the populace.[54] The reports seem to show that the impulse to worship God in familiar terms was only ever herded into the various acceptable theological boundaries.

There is some disagreement among historians of Islam about the extent of the government and religious elite's interest and involvement in the day to day management of correct theological dogma among the people.[55] However, whatever the involvement of the elite, most agree

[50]   Dakake, 'Guest,' 77-78.
[51]   Ibid., 79. We must take their reported fulfillment seriously. It stands to reason that not every account of women's fulfillment by their relationship with God is a male construction.
[52]   Dakake, 'Guest,' 72.
[53]   For a discussion of tensions between women's popular practice and developing elite theological and legal ideals in the early period, see Leor Halevi, *Muhammadís Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). See Ahmet Karamustafa's cogent criticism of the notion that seemingly unorthodox practices and beliefs in the late middle period are merely pre-Islamic survivals (Ahmet Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period (1200-1550)* [Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994], ch. 1).
[54]   "Tashbīh," *EI2*; Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 29, 39-40, 51, 101, 129-130, 174n39; Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), ch. 8.
[55]   See Talmon-Heller's disagreement with Michael Chamberlain (Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, ch. 8).

that popular preachers, Sufis, and other charismatic lay people would have had the greatest influence over the populace in forming theological norms.[56] Further, they seem to agree that popular and elite theologies most likely developed in conversation with one another; so much so, that it is difficult to draw a clean line between elite and popular theologies.[57] The women's reports do not seem to cross any elite theological boundaries such as claiming God has a shape, motion, or in this case, emotion. To the degree that we can trust the reports to give us a sense of the scope of these women's lives, most women had access to and took part in public life despite the fact that their lives were typically centred in the home. These women were expected to fulfil their obligations in the home as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, servants, and slaves. But they also numbered among the preachers, Sufis, and charismatics, not to mention the several women who were elite scholars themselves in the areas of *ḥadith* and jurisprudence.[58] Inside or outside the home, these particular women were typically in the thick of a specialised devotional life and would have been a part of these socially-bound theological conversations.[59] The reports suggest that the major theological positions of the day were part of the devotional lingua franca for these women.

The sayings on divine love seem to represent a reasonable account of popular theological attitudes that could not be controlled by the elite and/or did not need to be controlled. Even though the anthropomorphism is right there on the surface, it remains uncorrected by an interlocutor as it will be in the mainly polemical reports. It is as if the reports argue that

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[56]   Ahmed El Shamsy, 'The Social Construction of Orthodoxy,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, op. cit., 112; Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*; Jonathan Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[57]   Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*; Berkey, *Popular Preaching*; Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*; Yehoshua Frenkel, 'Popular Culture (Islam, Early and Middle Periods),' *Religion Compass*, 2, 2, 2008, pp. 195-225; and Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends.*

[58]   For an overview, see the entries on women in the biographical traditions and female scholars in *Encyclopedia of Women in Islamic Cultures* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005).

[59]   Blankinship, 'The Early Creed'; Jackson, *Black Suffering*, 29-30; and see Karamustafa on the problem of low/high distinctions in his *God's Unruly Friends*, ch. 1.

while it would be wholly inappropriate to say that God is a man, it is not entirely inappropriate to say that He acts like a man. As anthropomorphic as this view seems to be, it seems to me that it was nevertheless well suited to the elite's developing gendered cultural and theological boundaries.[60] Whatever the scope of the women's influence, their distinctly feminine interiorising path would have been conditioned by patriarchal social and theological norms as well as conditioning in the interplay of the reception, contribution, and transmission of those norms.

The women's engagement with their theological milieu becomes more complex when we take into account the different theological trends associated with the regions in which they lived. These women may have characterised God as their guardian lover, but the nature of His guardianship seems to differ markedly from region to region. Women from Basra and other places dominated by Khārijīs, Ibāḍīs, Qadarīs, or Muʿtazilīs, such as Bahrain, were typically confident that God must reward pious acts; whereas women in regions dominated by Ahl al-Ḥadīth perspectives were typically confident that God can reward them if He wills.

Basran women expected God to fulfil His promises to them in both this life and the next. Unlike those outside of Basra who thought of God as all-powerful beyond comprehension, understanding, or expectation, these women expected their guardian lover to act in a particular way as a function of His justice. Richard M. Frank sums up this theological position:

> As we are obligated absolutely to do what is right and obligatory, so God is obligated absolutely to reward us for what is right and for fulfilling our moral obligations. Knowing this we are certain of our reward in the next life, because God will inevitably do what is just and what He has said he will do.[61]

Maryam of Basra, who served Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, was known to have discoursed on love of God, and was said to have died while listening to a preacher talk about it. Like Rābiʿa, she is reported to have been supremely

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[60]   Ali, *Marriage.*
[61]   Richard M. Frank, 'Moral Obligation in Classical Muslim Theology,' *Journal of Religious Ethics,* 11, 2, Fall 1983, 207.

confident that God would provide her sustenance in this life, thus she never went looking for food or other provision. She said,

> I have never been concerned with my provision nor have I exhausted myself in seeking it from the day when I heard the statement of God the Glorious and Mighty, For in heaven is your provision as is that which you are promised.[62]

These women were also certain that their actions determined their guardian lover's acceptance or rejection of them. They were either confident that God would reward their struggles as promised, or worried that their worship was insufficient to earn a reward. For instance, Shabaka and Umm Ṭalq spoke with confidence about the efficacy of works. Shabaka is reported to have said that souls are purified by worship and Umm Ṭalq is reported to have said, "Whenever I prevent my lower soul from attaining its desires, God makes me a sultan over it."[63]

Basra was famous for its pious culture of weeping among both women and men.[64] Women and men alike were highly regarded for their constant weeping in remembrance of God and their ability to inspire others to weep. Among the female Basran weepers, it is not clear if women were weeping because they believed that their weeping would guarantee them paradise or because they were uncertain they would attain it. Whatever the case—weeping in confidence or from doubt—from the shared theological perspective of their region, these women expected their works to affect how God responded to them.[65] For instance, it is reported,

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62　Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 84; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 592. Maryam lived during the late second/eighth century.

63　Shabaka: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 90; Umm Ṭalq: Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 597; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 118. Shabaka's dates are unknown. Umm Ṭalq lived during the early second/eighth century.

64　There were small numbers of weepers everywhere, but the greatest concentration was in Basra (Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* [Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000], 13-14, 17; "Bukkā," *EI1*; "Baṣrā," *EI2*; Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 61).

65　See also Rayhāna: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 94, 306-308 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 632; Ghufayrā: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women,* 286-8 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 593; Saʿīda bint Zayd: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 108; Ḥafṣa bint Sīrīn: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 270-275 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 585; ʿAjrada the Blind: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 284 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 589; ʿUbayda bint Abī Kilāb: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 290-3 and Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 594; Ḥabība al-ʿAdawiyya: Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 202.

Shaʿwāna wept until we feared she would become blind. So we said to her, "We are afraid that you might become blind."

She wept and replied, "'We are afraid?' By God, becoming blind in this world from weeping is more desirable to me than being blinded by hellfire in the Hereafter".[66]

Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya wept from trusting that God would fulfil his promise to provide for her needs in this world. She was famously unconcerned for her welfare and only busied herself in worship.[67] But the same trust in God to do as He says sent her into paroxysms of doubt and weeping when she considered the worthiness of her worship. Rābiʿa seems to have been scrupulous to the point of obsession lest she commit some error before God. She is reported to have said that she feared that all of her actions—even those highly scrupulous visitors deemed worthy—would not be sufficient to guarantee God's love.[68]

Outside of Basra, in areas where the Ahl al-Ḥadīth were dominant, we find a tendency towards determinism and theological positions affirming God's all-encompassing power and the co-eternality of the attributes. Women's confidence and doubt was typically expressed in terms suggesting that works are not efficacious in and of themselves, but rather through their guardian lover's power to accept them or reject them as He desires. In these cases, when women are confident of God's love it is because they believe that God chose them for His love in an eternal covenant (*mīthāq*).[69] An unknown woman from Mecca recites:

[66]   Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 298; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 630. Shaʿwāna lived in the first/seventh century.
[67]   Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 588.
[68]   Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 3, 4; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 588.
[69]   Junayd al-Baghdādī writes about the covenant in a letter to Yūsuf b. al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī: "He selects you by that which He chooses you from among the pure ones among the elect. He singles you out by rendering you among those on whom He has bestowed His friendship. He chooses you by His choice of the great ones of His love. These are whom He has marked out by his selection for the height of companionship" (Ahmet Karamustafa, 'Walaya According to al-Junayd (d. 298/910),' in Tom Lawson (ed.), *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought, Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt* (London: IB Taurus, 2005), 66.

There are elect chosen for His love
He chose them in the beginning of time
He chose them before the splitting of His creation
As ones, entrusted, with wisdom, and eloquence.[70]

Ruqayya acknowledges that God could place her in Paradise just as easily as He might toss her into Hell. Nevertheless, she is confident that God's love will make the pain of Hell and the pleasure of Paradise meaningless to her. She is reported to have said,

> I love my Lord so much that if He were to send me to the Fire, His love would make me oblivious to its flames. If He were to send me to Paradise, His love would make me oblivious to its pleasure, for His love so overwhelms me.[71]

In some of these reports, women explicitly refer to theological positions such as the co-eternality of the attributes or the inability of the power of imagination and conjecture to comprehend a God who is all-encompassing and all-knowing. An unknown woman among those who lived in retreat by the Kaʿba was heard making a long supplication in anticipation of her death asking God to make her works acceptable to Him. She opens the supplication with an address to God, who she declares is beyond physical apprehension, imagination and conjecture, unchangeable, indescribable, all-knowing, and all-powerful. In a dramatic turn at the end of her declaration of God's transcendence, it was reported that she collapsed and died.

> O You whom eyes do not see, with whom imaginings (*al-awhām*) and conjecture (*al-ẓunūn*) cannot intermix, whom the things of this world (*al-ḥawādith*) cannot change, whom the describers cannot describe, O You who knows the weight of the mountains, the measure of the seas, the number of the raindrops and the leaves of the trees, and the number of everything upon which night falls and the day breaks.

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[70]   Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 239.
[71]   Ibid., 728. Ruqayya lived sometime during the first/seventh to third/ninth centuries.

Heaven cannot hide itself from Him, nor the earth, nor the mountain its impassable terrain, nor the sea its depths.[72]

Nuqaysh bint Sālim of Mecca was overheard taking refuge in God from God, not from her own actions, but from God's array of attributes. In this saying, she calls God "the Lover" and explicitly mentions His selective love of "those who turn." Yet she also emphasises God's chivalry by saying that He is never burdened by giving. Finally, unlike Ruqayya, Nuqaysh is worried about her final abode. She expresses her concern over her misdeeds because the affair is entirely in God's control, so much so that she is depicted as a slave begging for manumission. In the following supplication she makes reference to the prayer of the Prophet which begins, "O God, I take refuge in your good pleasure from Your anger," and his famous comment on fearing the day of judgment, "If you knew what I knew you would laugh less and cry more." Nuqaysh ends her long supplication asking, "What will be my home?"

> O Master of humankind, hardship travels with me. This is the station of one who seeks refuge in Your forgiving from Your anger and who takes refuge in Your mercy from Your wrath. O lover of those who turn! O One who is never burdened by giving! O possessor of bestowal and blessing! Strengthen my union (*waṣla*) with You by giving me confidence in You! Welcome me by freeing my neck! Console me by Your satisfaction.... O Master of Humankind, misdeeds weigh heavily on me. Sadness darkens my eyelids like kohl. I warn you that I will never be comfortable laughing until I know the location of my final abode. Oh, what will be my home?[73]

Love and Polemic

Several reports conform to a single trope that strongly suggests they are Ahl al-Ḥadīth polemical constructions. In each of these reports, a woman

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[72] Ibid., 973. Nuqaysh lived sometime during the first/seventh to third/ninth centuries.

[73] Ibid., 230; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-raqāʾiq, bāb qawl al-nabī law taʿlamūna mā aʿlam*; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-faḍāʾil, bāb fī muʿjizāt al-nabī*; et al.

supplicates God with the theologically controversial phrase, "By Your love for me." Then a man gently suggests the woman should say instead, "By my love for You." The woman refuses to do so and offers an account of her proof that God loves her. These reports stand out even more so because while women speak openly about their love of God and their experience of intimacy with Him—which they link to the experience of love itself— they do not explicitly say that God loves them. Given the direction the Sufi understanding of love was taking over the long term, these reports seem to illustrate a real concern over and an attempt to regulate changing notions of God's love that are straying too far into an unacceptable anthropomorphism. There is no sense of any push and pull between elite and popular theologies, just storytelling as theological corrective.

Most early Sufis considered themselves part of the larger Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement and their theology was in keeping with the movement's broad theological norms.[74] However, it did not mean that Sufis never varied from those norms or always talked in a way that would reflect agreement. There were Sufis here and there who made direct claims that God loved them using the controversial term *ʿishq* that denoted a passionate and thoroughly human love. In a famous story, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907) made such a claim. He and other Baghdādī Sufis were dragged before the courts to account for their various statements and actions. Ahmet Karamustafa points out that although a trial most likely took place, Nūrī's report was certainly embellished. It reads as an attempt to resolve a tension between elite theological norms and Nūrī's notion of love by co-opting it and regulating it into acceptable boundaries. In the story, Nūrī supports his claim that God loves by explaining that God's love is prior, citing the all-important verse from the Qur'an, "He loves them and they love Him." He further tames his declaration of passionate love by explaining that *ʿishq* is really a lesser type of love than the love mentioned in the Qur'an.

> When Nūrī was called on to explain his saying 'I love (*aʿshuqu*)
> God and He loves me (*yaʿshuqunī*)', he replied, 'I have heard
> God—His remembrance is exalted—say, "He loves them and

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they love Him (*yuḥibbuhum wa yuḥibbūnahu*) (Qurʾān 5:59)",
and passionate love (*ʿishq*) is not greater than serene love
(*maḥabba*), except that the passionate lover (*ʿāshiq*) is kept
away, while the serene lover (*muḥibb*) enjoys his love.'[75]

Thus resolved and regulated into the proper boundaries, the judge
declares, "If these men are heretics, then there is not a single monotheist
on earth" and dismisses them from his court.[76]

The reports that I read as mainly polemical likewise seem constructed
to regulate the unacceptably anthropomorphic notion of reciprocal
love. The women explain that God's love is prior, and stick safely to the
acceptable Qur'anic terms for love, *ḥubb* and *maḥabba*. The men in these
stories thus accept the women's relationship with God as their guardian
lover. The stories are told from the men's perspective as upbraiding
tales. The women surprise the men with their piety, sincerity, and
direct knowledge of God. The women show the men up, and the men,
now humbled, attest to the truth of the women's claims. In the end, the
stories serve to regulate love relationships with God within acceptable
theological boundaries and reassert the men's own social role as guardians
over women. Explicitly or implicitly, the men are the ultimate arbiters of
the theological correctness of the woman's claim to a direct relationship
with God.

Further supporting my reading of the stories as polemical construc-
tions, the reports are set in what were arguably the ideal circumstances
likely to sway its listeners to the proper Ahl al-Ḥadīth point of view on
God's love. Three of the stories involve conversions in contested political-
theological locations and the fourth is set at the heart of Muslim religios-
ity, the Kaʿba. Two of the stories involve influential traditional scholars
who vouch for the woman's claim, one as the transmitter and the other
himself as a subject in the story.

In two reports, the proof is conversions that are set in the context
of Muslim military expansion. The first is an account of a woman who
converted at the time her land was conquered by the Muslims. She
insists that God loves her because He raised armies in battle to bring

[75]   Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, 12.
[76]   Ibid.

her out of polytheism.[77] In the second account, Ṭaḥiyya says that the proof of God's love is in protection of her from a life of idol worship as a Christian in Nubia. The Nubians had long resisted Muslim expansion into their land. The military loss was a sore spot for early Muslims, who were more accustomed to the unstoppable power of the Muslim armies and, thus, Muslim superiority.[78] Placing her 'conversion' in Nubia might have played on Muslim emotions over the loss and given readers or listeners of the tale a doctrinal victory over the Nubians.

Ṭaḥiyya's report gets its traditional bonafides from its transmitter and her own theological interpretation of her conversion. The story was transmitted by Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), who represented the height of Sunni Sufism at the time. Further, the story has an incredibly short chain of transmission: Sulamī said that he heard the story directly from Aḥmad al-Mālīnī al-Ṣūfī, who seems to have visited Ṭaḥiyya regularly and questioned her himself. Joseph Lumbard comments that Sulamī was concerned with protecting Sufism from any hints of theological error; and we find that Ṭaḥiyya offers sound theological interpretations of her history.[79] For instance, she never says that she was a Christian, but rather that her parents were Christian. As far as Ṭaḥiyya is concerned, she had always been Muslim because God had chosen her for Islam in eternity. Finally, she tames her claim of reciprocal love into something else entirely. She loves God and God loves her, but she explains that God's love is His "solicitude" for her.

> Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Sulamī said that he heard from Aḥmad al-Mālīnī al-Ṣūfī who said, "I went to visit Ṭaḥiyya and before entering her home I overheard her speaking intimately with God. In her intimate conversation she said, 'O Who loves me, I love Him.'"
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> I entered and greeted her before asking, "Ṭaḥiyya, it is

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77 Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 977.
78 In 21/642, a large Muslim army engaged Nubians but ultimately was "forced to sign a truce." Aḥmad al-Kūfī comments in his *Kitāb al-Futuḥāt*, "The Muslims had never suffered a loss like the one they had in Nubia." Nubia would not come under Islamic rule until 674/1276 (Jay Spaulding, 'Medieval Christian Nubia and the Islamic World,' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 28, 3, 1995, 582).
79 Lumbard, 'From Ḥubb to ʿIshq,' 364.

true that you love God, but how do you know He loves you back?"

She said, "Yes, I used to live in Nubia and my parents were Christians. Every time my mother would carry me to church and bring me to the cross to kiss it, a hand would reach out and turn my face to prevent me. I learned that His solicitude for me is eternal."[80]

The third report is set in Basra, where the influence of the Qadarīs and Muʿtazilīs was strongest. This report seems to not only resolve the tension concerning God's love in the Ahl al-Ḥadīth tradition, but also places the Ahl al-Ḥadīth perspective on the attributes over and against the Basran tradition. In this report, the proof is not in the concubine's personal tale of conversion but in the man who believes her story, her owner, the Basran judge ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥasan al-ʿAnbarī (d. 168/784). He was a well-respected judge among the more rationalist Basran Ahl al-Ḥadīth. Standing in between the two positions, he was the perfect judge to affirm the reality of the attribute of love and the fact that God loves first. And al-ʿAnbarī judges: he was so swayed by the proof of her piety, he freed her.

The slave of ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥasan al-ʿAnbarī was sleeping next to him one night. He woke up and she was gone. He found her praying. While she was in prostration she would say, "By Your love for me, forgive me."

He corrected her, telling her not to say "by Your love for me, forgive me," but rather "by my love for You."

She said, "His love took me out of shirk to Islam! My eyes are awake while your eyes sleep!"

He replied, "Go, you are free for the sake of God."[81]

The final account is set at the centre of Muslim religiosity, the Kaʿba, and the proof is a verse from the Qurʾan. Dhūʾl-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/861) meets a slave circling the Kaʿba who claims that God loves her. She cites

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[80]   Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 852. Taḥiyya would have lived during the late fourth/tenth century.
[81]   Ibid., 616. ʿAnbarī's concubine would have lived during the mid second/eighth century.

as her proof the verse commonly used by the Ahl al-Ḥadīth to argue that God loves, but that His love does not well up in response to human love: "And there will come a people whom God loves [first] and who love Him [second]" (Q 5:57).[82] In other words, God is the all-powerful initiator of love, not the human being. The story ends with an account of a miracle to remove any further doubts of the woman's proof. Dhū'l-Nūn is upbraided and narrates the story as an instructive example for his listeners.[83]

> Dhū'l-Nūn said, "I was performing a circumambulation and I heard a sad voice calling out. A female slave was grasping at the curtain hanging on the Kaʿba, saying, 'My God, My Lord, My Master, by Your love for me You should forgive me!'"
>
> Dhū'l-Nūn [remarks to those listening to his story], "That was an extraordinary thing to say! So I said [to her], 'Slave, wouldn't you be safer saying 'By my love for You' than 'By Your love for me'?'
>
> "She replied, 'Get away from me, Dhū'l-Nūn! Don't you know that God loved a people before they loved Him? Haven't you heard God say, 'And there will come a people whom God loves and who love Him'? His love for them came before their love for Him!'
>
> "At this I said to her, 'How did you know that I am Dhū'l-Nūn?'
>
> "She replied, 'O Lazy, the hearts roam freely in the square of secrets, so I know you.'"[84]

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[82] On Ḥanbalī traditions on love, see Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979).

[83] The role of the upbraiding trope in Sufi pedagogy would be an interesting topic of study. Men seem to gain greater pedagogical authority by presenting themselves as the butt of a tale given the high value placed on humility in general and in scholars in particular.

[84] Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat*, 975. This woman would have lived during the early third/ninth century.

Conclusion

I would like to make a point of foregrounding Dakake's observation for its importance to the study of Sufism and gender. Dakake's research covers an extensive period of time and breadth of place yet she finds consistency in women's expression of their experience of God. She argues that Sufi women imagined God in domestic terms as the ideal faithful lover, provider, and protector. Throughout the article, Dakake is careful to argue that concerns over gender-segregation are at the root of the construction of their experience, and, at the same time, to accord women agency in the midst of these social constraints. But she tends to read "domestic" as a positive experience of God in apologetic terms, and thus does not include expressions of doubt or uncertain longing for God in her definition of a distinctly feminine interiorising tradition. To my mind, any definition of 'domesticity' should be open to the range of experience of a life centred in the home and, given the reports, considered no less fulfilling. Fitting with my reading of the language and tenor of the reports, I extended her observation to include experiences of doubt and uncertainty by reading 'domestic' in terms of the patriarchal social norm of male guardianship. Further complicating her notion of 'domesticity', I argued that the reports seem to articulate different notions of 'domesticity' given their respective theological affiliations. The content of the reported sayings was shaped by popular and elite theological positions typical of their time and place and may be evidence of a push and pull between elite and popular theologies. The women were in the thick of devotional life both publicly and privately and would have been in positions of influence—no matter how limited—in their respective communities. I expect that further study that widens the scope of time and place, as well as theological focus, will likely show even more complicated and overlapping concerns in early pious and Sufi women's thought, not simply with regard to early notions of domesticity. In this light, Dakake's observation of a distinctly feminine inward turn and devotional life should be opened up to take these findings into account.