

# Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the ‘Sufi Jesus’

**Milad Milani**

Created from the wine of love,  
Only love remains when I die.  
(Rumi)<sup>1</sup>

I’ve seen a world without a trace of death,  
All atoms here have Jesus’ pure breath.  
(Rumi)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

This article examines the limits touched by one religious tradition (Islam) in its particular approach to an important symbolic structure within another religious tradition (Christianity), examining how such a relationship on the peripheries of both these faiths can be better apprehended. At the heart of this discourse is the thematic of love. Indeed, the *Qur’an* and other Islamic materials do not readily yield an explicit reference to love in the way that such a notion is found within Christianity and the figure of Jesus. This is not to say that ‘love’ is altogether absent from Islamic religion, since every Qur’anic chapter, except for the ninth (*surat at-tawbah*), is prefaced *In the Name of God; the Merciful, the Most Kind (bismillahi r-rahmani r-rahim)*. Love (Arabic *habb*; Persian *Ishq*), however, becomes a foremost concern of Muslim mystics, who from the ninth century onward adopted the theme to convey their experience of longing for God. Sufi references to the theme of love starts with Rabia al-Adawiyya (717-801) and expand outward from there in a powerful tradition. Although not always synonymous with the figure of Jesus, this tradition does, in due course, find a distinct compatibility with him. Thus, the synonymic relationship

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<sup>1</sup> This is a free adaptation of Rumi’s verse from *Koliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, ed. B. Forouzanfar (Tehran: Talayeh, 1380), *ghazal* 683, line, 7109. Original lyrics cited in Shahram Nazeri’s song ‘Gandom’ from the album *Motrebe Mahtabroo* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> R.A. Nicholson (ed.), *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi: Edited From the Oldest Manuscripts Available with Critical Notes, Translation and Commentary*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925-1940), Book 1, line 798.

between 'Jesus' and 'love' can be noted particularly within the works of later Persian mystics such as Fariduddin Attar (1145/6-c.1221), Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), Hafiz-i Shirazi (1325/6-1389/90), and Muhyeddin ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240). The French Orientalist, Louis Massignon (1883-1962) went so far as to analogise the martyrdom of Mansour al-Hallaj (c.858-922) with the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

That the Sufis drew primarily from the *Qur'an*, and other Islamic materials, when referring to Jesus Christ is undisputed. Jesus is one of the more frequently mentioned figures in the *Qur'an* (cited twenty-five times) and is seen as a great prophet second only to Muhammad. He is designated 'Jesus the son of Mary' (*Isa ibn Maryam*) and, according to the *Qur'an*, Jesus was born of a virgin, performed miracles, raised the dead, and restored monotheism by revealing the Gospel (*Injil*).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Muslims maintain that Jesus did not die on the cross, was not divine, nor was he the Son of God or part of the Trinity; that is, they deny all doctrines that contravene the uncompromising Muslim doctrine of *tawhid* (Unity of God; that God is one and without partners). To the observer this may seem nothing more than a doctrinal dispute, which is taken up by the Qur'anic literature as a rebuttal to the ecumenical councils.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps bearing some degree of pertinence, the Sufis have in the past ventured to offer interpretations of Jesus that apparently come closest to Christian reckonings of him. For certain, there are those verses which convey a 'Christian-like' sensibility which illustrate an aspiration to be 'Jesus-like'.

Beware: don't say, "There aren't any [real] travellers on the Way,"

(Or), "There aren't any who are Jesus-like and traceless."

Since you aren't an intimate of secrets,

You have been thinking that others are not as well.<sup>6</sup>

The above verse, however, and others like it, can be misleading. When Sufis refer to Jesus in their works, the reference is chiefly to the Qur'anic Jesus. Even when it is not, all other citations are either deemed subordinate, or made to conform to, the Qur'anic account.

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<sup>3</sup> See Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, ed. and trans. Herbert Mason (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Mark Vernon, *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> The Uthmanic standard codex was commissioned in 651. See A.F.L. Beeston, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the end of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 239-40.

<sup>6</sup> 'Ruba'iyat,' 745. See Foruzanfar, *Koliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, p. 1289, trans. Ibrahim Gamard and Ravan Farhadi, 'Diwan-e Kabir,' at <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/rub-0745.html>. Accessed 25/10/2011.

This article will examine the way Jesus is portrayed within the broader scope of Islamic literature, but with the specific aim of contextualising him within the history of Islamic mysticism. This approach is one of the History of Religions, with some attention paid to literary analysis and the interpretation of major mystical writers and their works. My aim is to offer a definitive standpoint on Muslim interpretations of Jesus, especially as he is portrayed by the Sufis. Moreover, the specific aim of this work will be to clarify and sort through misconceptions associated with Sufi representations of Jesus. For instance, a cursory reading of Sufi literature may give the false impression that Jesus was accepted as a quasi-mystical demigod, that Jesus is secretly adored and revered by Muslims, and that Sufis, in particular, fashion themselves and their tradition upon the image and teachings of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Jesus is particularly limited within the scope of Islamic history and literature as a figure confined to the station of prophethood and his humanity, although some instances of irregularity can be seen in the imagination of Islamic mystics where the ‘Sufi Jesus’ is made comparable with a Christian Jesus. The next segment will provide a general sketch of the issues raised.

### **A Literary and Historical Overview of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism**

The Sufi reading of the Qur’anic Jesus gives emphasis to the internalisation process through which the Sufis themselves (re)imagined Jesus Christ in a mystical light. At best, they saw Jesus as a “proto-Sufi” who dressed in woollen garb.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Sufis recognised the reality of Jesus as a historical prophet of Islam. More often than not, however, Jesus was treated figuratively in their works. All of this was indicative of the Sufi preoccupation with the inward meaning of the *Qur’an*. The esoteric importance of such references as the “spirit” or “breath” (of God) become apparent in a special Sufi representation of Jesus as the ‘Perfect Man’ (*insan al-kamil*), a phrase adapted from the mystical works of Ibn al-’Arabi.<sup>9</sup>

Extrapolating that the ‘Sufi Jesus’ has some degree of thematic correlation with the Christian Jesus, at least on a superficial level, is

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<sup>7</sup> It is possible that such ideals could have their origin in early Orientalist thought, which mainly observed the East through a Christian European lens. On the question of Orientalism see Adam J. Silverstein, *Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> Oddbjorn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 84; quoting Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Meccan Revelations (Futuhat al-Makiyya)*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, trans. William C. Chittick and James W. Morris (New York: Pir Press, 2002).

unavoidable. To deny this would be to ignore obvious parallels, which must nonetheless be carefully treated and explained within their appropriate context. The most significant likeness is that of Jesus as the embodiment of love and perfection. There is, however, an important distinction to be made here between the Christian and Sufi view. Muslim mystics never accredit 'exclusivity' to Jesus, which Christians who see him as their chief means of salvation do. For the Sufi, Jesus is just one of many notable prophets within Islam, some of whom, like Moses, are given slightly more space in their works.<sup>10</sup> For instance, James Roy King had already pointed out that for Sufis both Jesus and Joseph were on equal footing as perfect embodiments of humanity.<sup>11</sup> What is unique about the treatment of Jesus across the vast corpus of Sufi materials is that he is, for them, emblematic of several important qualities: purity, perfection, love, and healing. As a result, Jesus has maintained a consistent role in both the orthodox and heterodox forms of Sufism.<sup>12</sup> The question may arise as to why Jesus is a frequent feature of Sufi works. The obvious answer, apart from his presence in the *Qur'an*, is a result of Sufi contributions made towards the Christian-Muslim dialogue. The case can also be made with the early Sufis dressing up as Christian mendicants; a possible deflection intended to make a dialogue of access to Jesus important for both sides. But to what end? It is likely that the Sufis were interested in winning converts for Islam, in the way that Jesuits would later come to serve the Church. The Sufis are well known for their openness to other faiths, in some cases even adapting their doctrines for the purpose of conversion. The Sufis may thus have purposefully and consistently integrated the figure of Jesus into their literary discourse, in order to feign familiarity with their Christian contemporaries. The idea, perhaps, was to convince Christians of the superiority of Islamic doctrine and the fact that Islam, and not Christianity, possessed the true interpretation of Jesus. It would be ahistorical to deduce the reverse hypothesis that Sufis were affiliating themselves with Christianity because they somehow imagined themselves as sharing core doctrines. All Sufis were first and foremost Muslims, whose mysticism only facilitated their aim to perfect their Islam and to assert its superiority among the faiths.

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<sup>10</sup> Liervik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, p. 91; quoted from John Renard, 'Jesus and the Other Gospel Figures in the Writings of Jalal al-din Rumi,' *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1987), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> James Roy King, 'Jesus and Joseph in Rumi's Mathnawi,' *Muslim World*, vol. 80, no. 2 (1990), pp. 81-95.

<sup>12</sup> Liervik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, p. 96; quoting Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 60.

Therefore, even though thematic correlations are noted in this work for interest of comparative analysis, they are not made to force the view that Sufism and Christianity are in any way doctrinally compatible. In their use of symbolic language, the Sufis could just as easily have used any prophetic figure, as did Rumi who more often than not invoked the name of Joseph to represent the extraordinariness of spiritual fulfilment.<sup>13</sup> The aim was to therefore underline apparent correlations with the intention of placing them in their proper context of analysis, and to show their proper use within the framework of mystical consciousness.

It is then useful to note the literary function of Jesus within Sufi poetry, where one commonly encounters the treatment of Jesus as a symbolic representation for spiritual transformation. Jesus is often invoked by a number of important Sufis to demonstrate the sought-after proximity with God. The ‘Sufi Jesus’ serves to illustrate both the transformation and perfection of the human soul, and the journey that it must endure in order to achieve its end-goal, *fana wa baqa* (annihilation and subsistence in God). As such, Jesus has been an important symbolic facilitator for describing the spiritual journey of the Sufi, especially in the visualisation of mystical ascent. Nevertheless, the role of Jesus in Sufism is somewhat varied: he appears as a prophet of Islam, the sacred reality within man, and even as the divine saviour of Christianity. This multi-dimensional aspect of Jesus in Sufi literature serves to explain the complexity of Sufis’ appreciation for both the historical and trans-historical reality of Jesus Christ (as found within and outside of Islam). The mystical interpretation of Jesus, in Sufism, remains highly prized, even though he is not singularly glorified but utilised as a powerful transformative idiom for spiritual development in Sufi literature. It is well known that Sufi teachings have always affected the average Muslim, whilst contributing to the “esoteric transmission of a higher spiritual knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> The Jesus of the *Qur’an*, Islamic legend, and the *tafsir* is honoured by the Sufis, and it is from this fundamentally Muslim understanding of Jesus that the Sufis have endeavoured to annotate the ‘extraordinariness’ of the figure of Jesus.

### **Jesus, Islam and the *Qur’an***

On the whole, themes such as “virgin birth,” “saviour figure,” and “sacrifice” have been part of the wider scope of the history of religions for quite some time. These are already noted in Zoroastrianism and the Mithraic mysteries,

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<sup>13</sup> See King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ pp. 90-95.

<sup>14</sup> Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, p. 97.

which signify a kind of ‘Jesus theme,’ so to speak, as an idea across the ages.<sup>15</sup> Thus, within the scope of Abrahamic religion, one is tempted to quote 1 John 2:2: “He is the atoning sacrifice...not only for ours [Christians] but also for the sins of the whole world,”<sup>16</sup> which seemingly correlates with the Qur’anic verse: “[w]e have sent you [Muhammad] forth as a blessing to mankind” (21:107).<sup>17</sup>

It is worth mentioning that Islam possesses its own special kind of personalised style of devotion in the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, which stands in parallel to the Christian worship of Jesus highlighted by Muslim mystics.<sup>18</sup> Another important and related element is that of the ‘passion’ of Ashura observed in orthodox Shi’ite Islam. Such an account of the heroic martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the prophet, for instance, also has interesting thematic parallels with the Jesus of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Shi’ite devotional images depict the Imams Ali and Hussein, whose martyrdoms are celebrated, dramatised, and ritualised by way of Passion Plays similar to those seen in Catholic ritual. This ‘Christ-like’ suffering and sacrifice is therefore brought to the height of its meaning in Islam by the Shi’a, as well as, more importantly, by the Sufis. There is no better example than that of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj, retold in Attar’s *Tadhkirat*, which is clearly made to mirror the Passion of Jesus Christ and which will be further addressed below.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a useful companion to the early beliefs of the Persian religion see John R. Hinnells, *Persian Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1973), especially pp. 42 and 74. One can also readily draw comparative notes from Egyptian, Greek, and Mesopotamian mythologies. For an introduction to relative themes in these and other religions of the ancient world see C. J. Bleeker and G. Widengren, *Historia Religionum: Religions of the Past* (Leiden: Brill, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Also, “We have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe” (1 Tim., 4:10). For biblical references see *Holy Bible [NIV]* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008), p. 1352b.

<sup>17</sup> *The Koran*, trans. N.J. Dawood (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 296. See also verse 7:158.

<sup>18</sup> With regard to the Light of Muhammad and the Mystical Tradition, see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), especially chapters 2 and 7.

<sup>19</sup> See Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, p. 74. For a comparison of the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali (and other notables) with Jesus see Kamal S. Salibi, *Who was Jesus?* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2007), pp. 101-3.

<sup>20</sup> For Attar’s *Tadhkirat al-Auliya* see *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya’ (Memorial of the Saints) by Farid al-Din Attar*, trans. A. J. Arberry (London: Routledge, 1983). The Passion describes the Christian theological

Tarif Khalidi's postulation of a "lost Muslim Gospel"<sup>21</sup> may also help to reiterate the important place of Jesus amid other prophetic figures in the *Qur'an*. It seeks to explain the reason why Jesus remains a distant apocalyptic figure of Islamic eschatology without an immediate or pragmatic moral relevance to Muslim piety. According to Khalidi, this is due to the prominence of the 'apocalyptic' (as opposed to the 'biblical') tradition within Islam.<sup>22</sup> While the 'apocalyptic' tradition has shaped the current position of Islam, the 'biblical' tradition concerning the life, mission, and Passion of Jesus has been largely neglected throughout Muslim history. The 'biblical' tradition merely prospered in the genre of literature called 'Tales of the Prophets' (*Qisas al-Anbiya*), whose transmission meant that Muslims benefited from only the piety and conduct of Jesus displayed throughout his life.<sup>23</sup>

For Muslim orthodoxy, therefore, Jesus is a figure primarily related to the *eschaton*, and his teachings have thus no real place in any immediate notion of salvation. Similarly for Islamic praxis, the entire 'performative' and 'transformative' effect of the symbolic discourse pertaining to Jesus is removed through the 'demotion' of 'Jesus the Son of God' to 'Jesus the Prophet of God.'<sup>24</sup> The 'Sufi Jesus,' however, is honoured within esoteric Islam,<sup>25</sup> in which a literal reading of the Qur'anic account is almost entirely absent. Here the hierophanic<sup>26</sup> agency of Jesus is postulated through the Sufi notion of the 'Perfect Man.'

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term that refers to the suffering of Jesus (physically, spiritually, and mentally) that covers his arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection.

<sup>21</sup> Khalidi, *Muslim Jesus*, pp. 17-45.

<sup>22</sup> Khalidi, *Muslim Jesus*, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Khalidi, *Muslim Jesus*, p. 26. In addition, it was a mere reality for the first three centuries of Islam to encounter the overwhelming presence of a living Christianity in areas such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, that were filled with diverse images of Jesus. See also Khalidi, *Muslim Jesus*, p. 29f.

<sup>24</sup> For the use of the terms 'performative' and 'transformative' in the context of a symbolic discourse and hierophanic history, see V. K. Urubshurow, 'Hierophanic History and the Symbolic Process: A Response to Ricoeur's Call for a "Generative Poetics",' *Religious Traditions*, vol. 13 (1990), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> See Leonard Lewisohn, 'The Esoteric Christianity of Islam,' in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 127-159.

<sup>26</sup> From the Greek *heiros* and *phainein*; to signify the manifestation of the sacred. The employment of the term here is in the Eliadean sense of "theophany" (the appearance of god). See Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. xiii.

The *Qur'an* uniquely honours Jesus, and no other prophet, with the titles of 'Word' and 'Spirit' of God, but this is not a secret veneration of Jesus as one might be led to believe.<sup>27</sup> The *Qur'an* instead 'revisits' past events and prophetic figures, summarising major scriptural accounts, and thus employing a language relevant to the historical Jesus. It is Sufi authors who in fact facilitate a closer reading of Islamic materials; Ibn al-'Arabi fleshed out his philosophy of the 'Perfect Man' (*insan al-kamil*) based on his reading of Hadith Qudsi.<sup>28</sup> It would be anachronistic to converge the Qur'anic and Sufi accounts, asserting that Islamic theology recognises Jesus as presenting a path based on the love of God, and deducing 'love' as a core and originating principle of Sufi cognition.<sup>29</sup> Khalidi is certainly mistaken in his assumption that the 'Sufi Jesus' cannot always be "easily distinguished" from the Jesus of the Gospels, which conveys his eagerness to voice a modern discourse based on theological affinity.<sup>30</sup> He wants to use Sufism, perhaps in haste, to bridge the awkward gap between the Muslim Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels. If such a venture is at all going to be possible, it will require careful analysis of the way in which Jesus is placed within Sufism first.

### **Producing the 'Sufi Jesus'**

James Roy King's brief analysis, however, gives special attention to the literary implication of mystical thought.<sup>31</sup> King fully appreciated the fact that the mystics, although rooted in Islam, carry the meaning of religious material "well beyond what we would normally identify as Islamic norms."<sup>32</sup> A more daring orator of the Sufi path, Abu Sa'id Abul Khayr (d. 1049), stated that "The doctrine that I preach is contained in the eighth seventh of the Koran," i.e., not the seven sevenths (the entire *Qur'an*):

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, as a side, it is curious that the *Surat al-Maryam* was to be the 'salvation' of the Muslim community sent for refuge to Christian Abyssinia.

<sup>28</sup> A well-known Hadith: "I was a prophet when Adam was still between water and clay." See Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammed: Why the Prophet Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> For an erroneous interpretation of this matter see Mehdi Hassan, 'Jesus the Muslim Prophet,' *New Statesman* (10 December 2009), at <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2009/12/jesus-islam-muslims-prophet>. Accessed 25/10/2011.

<sup>30</sup> See Tarif Khalidi, 'Jesus through Muslim eyes,' in *Islam and Jesus Christ*, BBC Religions 2009, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/isa.shtml#top>. Accessed 25/10/2011.

<sup>31</sup> See King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' p. 89.



No, the infinite Word of God that was sent down to Muhammad is the whole seven seventh of the Koran; but that which He causes to come into the hearts of His servants does not admit of being numbered and limited, nor does it ever cease.<sup>33</sup>

The heterodox school of thought to which Abu Sa'id belonged accentuated the Hallajian tone that challenged the Islamic orthodoxy of its time. As such, there are several notable Muslim mystics that help define the mystical representation of Jesus for later Sufis such as Hallaj, Ibn Arabi, and Rumi. Hallaj is known as a 'Christ-like' saint, whose life offers important and possibly deliberate parallels between his 'passion' and that of Jesus. Ibn al-'Arabi intellectualised the central Sufi concepts of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) and *insan al-kamil* (the 'Perfect Man'), as opposed to the orthodox notions of unity (*tawhid*) and prophethood. The intellectual rigour of Ibn al-'Arabi, moreover, is particularly useful in understanding those subtle and esoteric concepts retained by a Sufi worldview. Finally, Rumi was equally provocative in presenting a 'Jesus of spirit,' whose redemptive qualities are equated with ultimate Sufi aims of union and perfection.

### The 'Sufi Jesus'

From the point of view of the Islamic mystic, Jesus is the exemplary Sufi. He is neither a mere mortal as the *Qur'an* openly suggests, nor the singular saviour of all mankind as perceived by Christian religiosity. For the Sufi, he was one who had conquered the lower soul (*nafs*): "As Jesus rode his donkey, ride on it... Let Jesus' spotless spirit be your goal."<sup>34</sup> His breath, likened to the power of Sufi *dhikr*,<sup>35</sup> was also a life-giving force: "This breath of Jesus, which hourly brings forth another dawn, causes a sleeping world to raise its head from the earth."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the late Master of the Nimatullahi Khaniqahi Sufi Order, Javad Nurbakhsh, wrote:

[i]t is the Sufis who have attempted to preserve the memory of Jesus as he really was, alive in their minds, and in the minds of others, and

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<sup>33</sup> *Asraru'l-tawhid*. Cited in R.A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994), p. 59. In the case of Abu Sa'id, William C. Chittick would caution the point of "perfecting" Islam more so than going beyond it. See Chittick, *Faith and Practice of Islam* (University of New York Press: Albany, 1992), p. 173.

<sup>34</sup> See Farid al-Din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. A. Darbandi and D. Davis (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> The Sufi *zikr* ("remembrance") is a specific Sufi practice that involves the combination of breathing techniques with the recitation of (one of) God's names.

<sup>36</sup> Attar, *Diwan*; cited in Javad Nurbakhsh, *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* (London: Khaniqah Nimatullahi Publications, 1992), p. 51.

to keep him in their hearts. In Sufi literature, Jesus is the paragon of a perfect human being and... a true master.<sup>37</sup>

From its beginnings, Sufi literature portrays Jesus as the symbol of purity and an example *par excellence* of a true *darvish* (to use the Persian vernacular).<sup>38</sup> Classical Sufi writers who referred to Jesus in this way have already demonstrated the importance of Jesus to Muslim thought; in their works, Jesus was enshrined as the ‘instrument of God,’ a ‘perfect being,’ and a true possessor of divine wisdom. The Sufi representation of Jesus, whereby his nature is deliberately probed, is thus provocative. For this reason, an analysis of related Christian themes, such as ‘virgin birth,’ ‘crucifixion,’ and ‘resurrection,’ is pertinent to understanding their proper place within mystical thinking.

*Surat al-Maryam* is clear about the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin (*Qur’an* 19:19-22); distinct emphasis, however, is placed upon the fact that Jesus is the son of Mary (*Isa bin Maryam*) and not the son of God. The miraculous birth of Christ is of course indicative of his divinity for Christians, yet the Sufi of antiquity explored Jesus as “an absolutely extraordinary” individual who had no “genetic ties with God.”<sup>39</sup> Modern Sufi representations of Jesus are also distinctly non-Christian, though Jesus is made the absolute embodiment of ‘love’ and ‘purity.’ Dorothy C. Buck’s Sufi allusion to the Virgin Birth is worth noting in this regard.<sup>40</sup> She describes Jesus as the love within oneself, conceived through one’s own purity and with the end aim of crucifying the egoistic ‘self’ (*nafs*). Her combined Sufi interpretation of Mary as the embodiment of purity, and Jesus as the embodiment of love, here creates a typology for spiritual transformation. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus additionally has its place in Christ’s Sufi representation. The Qur’anic account states that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is false,<sup>41</sup> asserting

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<sup>37</sup> See Nurbakhsh, *Jesus*, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Known to the West as “dervish” the term literally means “poor” but carries spiritual connotations in that one is absent from the world but present in God. ‘Spiritual poverty’ is a common rendering among modern Sufis. See Mansour Shaki and Hamid Algar, ‘Darvis,’ in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (California: Mazda Publishers, 1996), vol. 7, pp. 72-76.

<sup>39</sup> King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ p. 83.

<sup>40</sup> Dorothy C. Buck, ‘Reflections on the Psycho-Spiritual Journey and the Self in the Light of Christ,’ *Sufi*, vol. 72 (Winter, 2006-2007), pp. 10-19.

<sup>41</sup> Essential to an understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus in the *Qur’an* and Islamic thought is Todd Lawson’s *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). Lawson’s study offers a thorough examination of the singular Qur’anic verse (4: 157-8) concerning the crucifixion of Jesus.

that he did not suffer and die on the cross in order to be resurrected. The *Qur'an* maintains, nonetheless, that Jesus ascended to heaven.<sup>42</sup>

To fully grasp the significance of a Sufi reading of these events, it is necessary to draw a brief comparison between the Passion of Jesus and the so-called 'passion' of al-Hallaj.<sup>43</sup> The Qur'anic passage reads as follows:

They declared: "We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did. Those that disagreed about him were in doubt concerning him; they knew nothing about him that was not sheer conjecture; they did not slay him for certain. God lifted him up to Him; God is mighty and wise.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, the *surah* is adamant that Jesus was not killed, "but so it was made to appear to them..." It goes on to stress the point: "for a surety they killed him not. No, Allah raised him to Himself" (4:157). Bearing this in mind, Attar's account of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj relates that each time a limb was taken from al-Hallaj he praised his executioners for bringing him closer to God.<sup>45</sup> In summary, they tortured, crucified, burnt, and cast his ashes into the Tigris, but the suggestion repeatedly made by Attar is that they did not kill him, for from every one of his limbs (and afterwards from his ashes) came the cry: "I am the Truth."<sup>46</sup> Attar's account of the Passion, in which the suffering Christ and the figure of al-Hallaj can be easily transposed, offers interesting challenges to the literal reading of the Qur'anic passage when the account is taken purely as anecdotal.

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<sup>42</sup> The exegesis of early Christian sects are noted: that there was a substitute; that Jesus never had a physical body; and that he merely appeared in human form. These are the Basilidan, Docetic, and Marcionite views respectively. For a summary on the opinions of the Christian sects on the crucifixion, see Mokhdar Stork, *A-Z Guide to the Qur'an* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2002), p. 161. For example, the line from the verse *but they thought they did* can be read literally as "he was made to resemble another for them." However, Dawood offers the former, as does Stork in his translation. See *The Koran*, trans. Dawood, p. 76, and Stork, *A-Z Guide*, p. 160. Neal Robinson's article, 'Jesus,' in *Encyclopaedia of Qur'an* (s.v.) is a useful guide on the Muslim evidence for the death of Jesus.

<sup>43</sup> For Attar's account of the 'Passion of Al-Hallaj' see Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, p. 264. For the Persian see Javad Salmasizadeh, *Tadhkerat al-Auliya': Sheikh Farid al-Din Attar Neyshaburi* (Tehran, 1381/2003), pp. 606-613. On the life, teachings, and death of al-Hallaj, see especially Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj*. It was Massignon who made a special case of the "Christ-like" resemblance of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj, which he dubbed as "The Passion of Hallaj."

<sup>44</sup> *The Koran*, trans. Dawood, p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, p. 270; see Appendix for my abbreviation.

<sup>46</sup> Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, p. 271.

When reading Attar's account, furthermore, the Sufi representation of Jesus is considerably different to the Christian. Since the Sufi account merely offers a mystical rendering of the crucifixion, there is no real or even literal sense of the resurrection at play. The Sufi rendition of the Qur'anic passage thus provides a closer reading of its intended meaning. For instance, the Sufi could read the Qur'anic account of Jesus' ascension symbolically to mean that Christ cannot be killed at the hands of his enemies, as this suggests that the 'Word' and 'Spirit' of God can be destroyed at the hands of His creatures. There is thus a likely correspondence between the Passion of al-Hallaj and the Passion of Jesus, since al-Hallaj was a historical entity who actually did suffer the atrocities so vividly described by Attar.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Massignon was confident that al-Hallaj had deliberately intended to re-enact a Christ-like scenario that he publicly declared in Baghdad, vowing "to seek death in the holy war of divine love; thirteen years, at least, prior to his execution."<sup>48</sup>

### **Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi: Virgin Birth, 'Perfect Man' and Sacred Breath**

The majority of notable Sufi figures were experts in jurisprudence and theology. This holds true for even the most outspoken Sufis like al-Hallaj (d. 922) and, after him, Ayn al-Quzat al-Hamadani (1098-1131). Both were martyred and renowned for their knowledge of the Islamic sciences, and it is true that such figures came too close to espousing a heretical and possibly Christian outlook in the case of al-Hallaj. Generally speaking, the Sufis were motivated to present a practical teaching for the common folk and also to adapt Islamic thought and spirituality to the times in which they lived. One important doctrine was the ideal of the 'Perfect Man' (*insan al-kamil*), the seeds of which were present in Sufism as early as the ninth century in the thoughts of Abu Yazid al-Bistam (or Bayazid) (804-874). Much later, the champion of this doctrine, famously known as the 'Great Sheikh' of Andalusia, was Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi.

Jesus was among the few prophetic figures of Islam located within the mystical tradition of the 'Perfect Man.' The Sufis particularly emphasised the healing power of Jesus' breath, seeing him as synonymous with the 'sacred breath' and noting that Jesus himself was conceived by the breath of Gabriel.<sup>49</sup> This technical language employed by the Sufis acted as signifiers quite detached from their Christian meaning, used within the correct context of an

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<sup>47</sup> For the official sources and records of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj see Massignon, *The Passion*, pp. 280-292.

<sup>48</sup> Massignon, *The Passion*, p. xvii.

<sup>49</sup> Mathnawi, Book 3, Line 207. Also, Nurbakhsh extracts relevant verses from Attar, Hafiz, and 'Eraqi on the breath of Jesus. See Nurbakhsh, *Jesus*, pp. 51-2.

Islamic understanding of such terms. The attributed terms ‘virgin birth’ and ‘sacred breath,’ which were based on the *Qur’an* (*surah* 19), had never implied a Sufi acceptance of Christian doctrine. Rather, their Sufi utilisation demonstrated an effort to advance the correct Muslim view. An encounter with Christian doctrine was, however, influential in the development of the idea of the ‘Perfect Man,’ equated as it is with the Christian ‘Son of God.’

Indeed, Rumi presents the idea of the ‘Perfect Man’ as a personal means to reach God. Rumi’s portrayal of Jesus moved “well beyond the literal message” of his Muslim and Christian sources and well “into the realms of mystical experience, of which he was such a master.”<sup>50</sup> Rumi interiorised Jesus as “the perfection of humanity,” making a direct link with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s use of *insan al-kamil*. R.A. Nicholson, who noticed the connection between the two Sufi figures, maintains that Jesus “typifies the ‘Perfect Man’ whose ‘otherness’ has been sublimated and absorbed in the essential unity of the Godhead.”<sup>51</sup> In linking Rumi and Ibn al-‘Arabi, Nicholson was keen to explain how the ‘Perfect Man’ can display the “attributes of God” and reflect the “universality of God.”<sup>52</sup> R.W.J Austin presents a similar view in his reading of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s notion of the ‘Perfect Man’:

[A]t the spiritual and intellectual level, man’s intelligence prompts him to impose on the Cosmos the forms and images of his own imagination and awareness. In the case of high spiritual attainment this human capacity may become a microcosmic channel of the divine creative act.<sup>53</sup>

At a glance, both the notions of the ‘Perfect Man’ and the Son of God specify divine fulfilment within individual experience; the only exception is that the mystical state of the ‘Perfect Man’ is one of ‘universality.’ The Sufi assertion that the ‘Perfect Man’ is connected with all other perfect men is thus not ‘exclusive’ as Jesus is in Christian dogma. King places further emphasis here, where, for Rumi, “Jesus is one [i.e., unified]...but at the same time, he is one to different people in many different ways.”<sup>54</sup>

Rumi was particularly well versed in Christian doctrine, incorporating Jesus into the *Mathnawi* as a direct result of the religious climate in Konya. In

<sup>50</sup> King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ p. 85.

<sup>51</sup> King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ p. 84; on R. A. Nicholson see his *Commentary on Books 1 and 2 of The Mathnawi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 48; on Ibn al-‘Arabi see R. W. J Austin’s introductory comments to *The Bezels of Wisdom* (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge Press, 1980), pp. 34-39.

<sup>52</sup> King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ p. 85; see Nicholson, *Commentary on Books 1 and 2*, pp. 33, 49, 55, 120, 180, and more.

<sup>53</sup> Austin, *Bezels*, pp. 35-6.

<sup>54</sup> King, ‘Jesus and Joseph,’ p. 86n25.

modern discourse, however, valorisation of Rumi's Muslim affiliation almost always falls by the wayside.<sup>55</sup> According to Lloyd Ridgeon, "Rumi was first and foremost a Muslim who viewed Islam as the perfect religion," and whose work, based on the Qur'anic revelation, implied that "Islam, as a universal religion, is superior to Christianity and Judaism."<sup>56</sup>

Rumi's observation of the breath of Christ here offers interesting parallels with the Jesus of the Gospels. There are examples such as Rumi's story of the fool who asked Jesus to teach him the "exalted name."<sup>57</sup> Rumi also invokes the image of Jesus the miracle-worker, delivering the Islamic decree that Jesus performs all miracles solely by the will of God. Rumi's story of Jesus and the jackal's den bares striking similarity with Matthew 8:20, both conveying Jesus as a drifter with no roof over his head.<sup>58</sup> The moral of Rumi's story, however, maintains that Jesus is forced from one place to another in being drawn closer to God;<sup>59</sup> Jesus is effectively made into a *darvish*. Even when Rumi seems to repeat Matthew 5:49, his aim is to impart a valuable lesson on the humanity and humility (*ihsan*) of the prophet.<sup>60</sup>

The "life-giving power" of Jesus' breath is numerously referenced throughout the majority of Sufi works, where the Sufis take the Qur'anic title of *Ruh Allah* ("Spirit of God") to the height of its mystical meaning.<sup>61</sup> *Surah* 4:171 reads: "The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was no more than God's apostle and His Word which He cast to Mary: a spirit from Him."<sup>62</sup> Jesus' miracles have thus a direct association with the name 'Spirit of God,' since God's spirit was blown into Mary when she subsequently conceived Jesus. In the same way, Jesus breathes life into objects as explained in *surah* 3:49, where he brings the clay bird to life by blowing into it. None of this suggests that Jesus is singled out in any way in the *Qur'an*.<sup>63</sup> Sufis simply exercised the appropriate Qur'anic language in their representation of Jesus, yet they did not reduce Jesus to mere symbolism. The fact is that Jesus receives a comprehensive

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<sup>55</sup> See Lloyd Ridgeon, 'Christianity as Portrayed by Jalal al-Din Rumi,' in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, pp. 99-127.

<sup>56</sup> Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> M 1, 229-47.

<sup>58</sup> *Fiji ma fihi*; A.J. Arberry, *Discourses of Rumi* (Richmond: Curzon, 1993), p. 54; cited in Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> See Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p. 122n13.

<sup>60</sup> See Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p.101.

<sup>61</sup> See Nurbakhsh, *Jesus*, p. 51f.

<sup>62</sup> Dawood, *The Koran*, p. 178.

<sup>63</sup> Parrinder, for example, cites Jesus as one of six prophets who are given special names in the *Qur'an*, with Jesus being *Ruh Allah*. See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p. 40.

treatment within Sufi literature. In Rumi's works he is sometimes the Islamic prophet and at other times the Christian Son of God,<sup>64</sup> referring to Jesus frequently as a metaphor and often in contrast to the donkey.<sup>65</sup> Placing Jesus within the proper context of mystical thinking, Rumi wished to convey that the "donkey symbolises man's body while Jesus – referred to as the spirit of God (*ruhullah*), breath, word, and wind – represents man's higher faculties such as reason or spirit."<sup>66</sup>

Likewise, Ibn al-'Arabi's treatment of Jesus facilitates an important parallel between the life-giving power of Jesus, through his breath, and the way Jesus was conceived. Furthermore, Ibn al-'Arabi asserts a particular harmony between the Qur'anic 'Jesus son of Mary' (*Isa ibn Maryam*) and the biblical 'Jesus son of God.' He simply suggests: "As the son of Mary, Jesus is human; but as one who could revive the dead, Jesus was 'of God as Spirit'."<sup>67</sup> Both Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi perceived Jesus to be at the centre of the human imaginative and creative process, which was directly linked to God through a perception of him as the 'Perfect Man' and 'the breath of God.' It is obvious that the mystics carried "the meaning of Jesus well beyond what we would normally identify as Islamic norms," and well beyond what was required of a prophet, whereby Jesus is imagined differently as having "a special capacity to renew and transform human lives, to render them whole and complete."<sup>68</sup> To be sure, such representations of Jesus as found in the works of Ibn al-'Arabi and Rumi were largely figurative and demonstrative of the internalisation process by which Jesus becomes an agent of mystical cognisance. Although Jesus was uniquely imbued with magnificent titles, he was nevertheless equally placed among the rank of other perfect men. Given that Rumi also mentions Joseph (Yusuf) in his *Mathnawi* a great deal, Jesus is not in any way uniquely glorified by Sufis.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p. 101.

<sup>65</sup> M 1, 3448 (incorrectly cited by Ridgeon as 3447); see 'Christianity,' p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Ridgeon, 'Christianity,' p. 101.

<sup>67</sup> See King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' p. 87, citing Austin, *Bezels*, pp. 176, 178, 181.

<sup>68</sup> King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' pp. 89-90.

<sup>69</sup> King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' p. 90. Also, on Joseph fulfilling the role of the 'Perfect Man,' see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Truimphal Sun* (London: Fine Books Centre, 1978), p. 179. For the emphasis on Joseph as a symbol of suffering, see Sorour S. Soroudi, 'On Jesus's Image in Modern Persian Poetry,' *Muslim World*, vol. 69, no. 4 (1979), pp. 221-27.

### Al-Hallaj and the 'Sufi Jesus'

In this segment, the focus is placed on the theme of 'resurrection' and how the Sufis made use of this Christian theme in relation to Jesus. As mentioned, the idea of resurrection is not explicit in Sufism and is only brought to light through the esoteric language of *fana wa baqa*. An immediate comparison can be made with the language invoked in Christian literature regarding the experience of 'dying to self,' the 'crucifixion of self,' and 'being reborn in God through Christ'; all are frequent reflections in the writings of St. Paul.<sup>70</sup> This is supported by the example of John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father but by me," which illustrates how the faithful are united with God through the agency of Jesus. With Rumi the association is made by seeing Jesus "as an example of *tawhid*, [and] as a means by which others can attain [unity]."<sup>71</sup> Rumi was here careful to avoid the Muslim sin of associationism (*shirk*), side-stepping the alleged error of his predecessor al-Hallaj in making a clear distinction between divinity and humanity. The Sufis who thus came after al-Hallaj made use of the terms *fana* and *baqa* to illustrate the unconditional absence or dissolution of 'self-hood.'

The account of the martyrdom of al-Hallaj, as it is portrayed in Sufi literature, readily calls to mind the execution of Jesus. The Sufis, however, did not intend to announce al-Hallaj as their Jesus but rather to reinforce Islamic doctrine. A well-known verse from Hafiz betrays the Muslim attitude of Islamic mystics: "[s]hould the Holy Spirit once again impart its grace, others too will do all that Jesus had done."<sup>72</sup> Jesus was therefore not singularly glorified in the Sufi mind, and al-Hallaj was 'Jesus-like' simply by virtue of the grace of God. The insistence of Islamic doctrine on the distinction between creation and Creator permeates all Sufi works; as such, the role of Jesus portrayed therein can only be seen as an indirect critique of his Christian representation, even though comparative examples abound. Most noticeable is that both Jesus and al-Hallaj were condemned for the sin of association with God that is strictly forbidden in Judaism and Islam. There are other uncanny instances such as al-Hallaj's infamous declaration: *ana'l haqq* ("I am the Truth/Absolute"),<sup>73</sup> which is a faint echo of Jesus' decree: "I am the Way, the

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<sup>70</sup> See Col. 3:3; Gal. 6:14; I Cor. 15:31.

<sup>71</sup> See King, 'Jesus and Joseph,' p. 86; and also James E. Royster, 'Configurations of *Tawhid* in Islam,' *Muslim World*, vol. 77, no. 1 (1987), pp. 28-42.

<sup>72</sup> Author translation. See Hafiz, *Diwan-e Hafiz*, ed. Parviz Khanlari (Tehran: Nil Publishing, 1362AH/1984), p. 289.

<sup>73</sup> Massignon renders "I am the Creative Truth." See Massignon (ed.), *Kitab al-Tawasin* (Paris: Librairie Paul Guethner, 1913), p. 175; cited by Nicholson, *Studies*, p. 79n3. Nicholson also states that "*Al-haqq* is the Creator as opposed to the creatures (*al-khalq*)



Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). Indeed, one cannot utterly reduce the mystics to a normative frame of Islamic thought because the Sufis did actually speak about the interconnectedness of God and man.

Bayazid was one of the first Sufis, before al-Hallaj, to relate that God knows God; that is, “He who discourses of eternity must have within him the lamp of eternity.”<sup>74</sup> Even Rumi, long after al-Hallaj, beautifully illustrates the merging of subject and object through the use of symbolic metaphor. The ‘drop’ cannot see the ocean through the eyes of the ‘drop,’ it can only see the ‘ocean’ through the eyes of the ‘ocean,’ whereby, when the drop falls into the ocean, no trace of it remains.<sup>75</sup> Bayazid was careful to demonstrate that in moments of ecstasy he was completely beside himself and that no trace of his identity remained. For instance, the following saying attributed to Bayazid has become a necessary but common cliché in Sufi parlance: when told by a group “we are looking for Bayazid,” he answered “I have had no news of him for some thirty years now.”<sup>76</sup> By contrast, al-Hallaj had a manifest personality that troubled unaccustomed onlookers in his manner of speech and behaviour that was similar to the way Jesus was seen by the early Jewish community.<sup>77</sup> It is

and this seems to be the meaning in which al-Hallaj understood the term, but it is also applied to God conceived pantheistically as the one permanent reality.”

<sup>74</sup> R.A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Penguin Arkana, 1989), p. 51.

Nicholson says, “The light of intuitive certainty by which the heart sees God is a beam of God’s own light cast therein by himself; else no vision of Him were possible,” Nicholson, *Mystics*, p. 50.

<sup>75</sup> The ‘drop’ and the ‘ocean’ illustrate the principal of *fana* and *baqa*, and by extension the relationship between creation and Creator. See Nurbakhsh, *The Path: Sufi Practice* (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> Bayazid’s ecstatic utterance was recorded by Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfihani (d.1038) in the *Hilyat al-awliya*: “I was absent from God for thirty years. My absence from him was [a result of] my mentioning him, for when I refrained from it I found him in every state, until it was as if he was me (*hatta ka-annah ana*).” See Jawid. A. Mojadeddi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: Tabaqat Genre from Al-Sulami to Jami* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 47.

<sup>77</sup> See Mason, ‘Hallaj,’ p. 71f; Terry Graham, ‘Junayd: The Master Who Made Sufism Conventionally Acceptable,’ *Sufi*, vol. 67 (Autumn 2005), p. 67f. Al-Hallaj is said to have continuously broken with conventional Sufi protocol in parting with several teachers, and was acquitted by all the sheikhs due to his conduct and impulsiveness of character. It is related that when al-Hallaj met Ibrahim al-Khawwas, al-Hallaj asked him what he had gained from his forty years on the Sufi path. Ibrahim answered that he had made the doctrine of trust in God his own. Al-Hallaj then exclaimed, “O lose yourself! For then there’ll be no need to trust in God.” See Nurbakhsh, *The Path*, p. 41. Hujwiri gives a detailed account of al-Hallaj. See *Kashf al-Mahjoub (The Revelation of*

therefore pertinent to distinguish the literary from the historical al-Hallaj; the historical al-Hallaj may have stood for an exposed Sufi sentiment that shared close similarities with Christian doctrine. Whether al-Hallaj was actually guilty of ‘infusion’ or the Christian doctrine of incarnation (*hulul*) remains uncertain.<sup>78</sup> He certainly believed himself to be a Muslim, and a devout one at that.<sup>79</sup> What appeared problematic to the tribunal who had called him on account of heresy was his meddling with doctrine.<sup>80</sup> For instance, Hallaj distinguished human (*nasut*) from divine (*lahut*) nature, asserting that ‘personality’ survived even in their union; a point which he illustrates in a well-known verse:

I am He whom I love, and he whom I love is I.  
We are *two* spirits dwelling in one body,  
If thou seest me, thou seest Him;  
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.<sup>81</sup>

It may be fair to say that both al-Hallaj and the historical Jesus were thus likely victims of political intrigue.<sup>82</sup> For all the precarious nature of the historical al-Hallaj, however, he was in the end made the poet’s muse. That is, the Sufis utilised him as a discursive and literary trope that preserved what they held to be the essence of the Hallajian doctrine of *divine love*, envisioning al-Hallaj as the embodiment of mystical transfiguration but never associating him with singular pre-eminence.

In regards the theme of resurrection, Christianity and Sufism come to be correlated in the figure of Jesus as the embodiment of ‘love,’ as the notion of divine love plays a key role in the imagination of the Sufis: “To whom may I

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*the Veiled*): *An Early Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. A.R. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1976), pp. 150-153.

<sup>78</sup> For al-Hallaj as a Manichean see Cyril Glasse, ‘Some Notes on Manichaeism, Islam, the Essenes,’ presented at the Seventh International Conference of Manichaean Studies (August 2005).

<sup>79</sup> Massignon, *The Passion*, p. 273.

<sup>80</sup> Massignon, *The Passion*, pp. 248-250.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholson, *Studies*, p. 78.

<sup>82</sup> See Appendix for my summary of al-Hallaj’s crucifixion based on Attar’s account. The full gruesomeness of the account can be found in Attar’s *Tazkerat*; see Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, pp. 268-271. Attar renders the event as a legal execution, whereas Mason noted the event as a vengeful murder and even a sadistic slaughter, urged and orchestrated by the brutal vizier Hamid, a figure whose dominance in the Baghdad political arena of 309/922 reflects the corruption and decadence of the Abbasid caliphate of al-Muqtadir and his sycophants. See Mason, ‘Hallaj and the Baghdad School of Sufism,’ in *The Heritage of Sufism I*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 73f.

relate such a subtlety? She killed me – my stony-hearted mistress, yet possessed that life-giving breath of Jesus.”<sup>83</sup> Through love, the annihilated Sufi is ‘resurrected’ to life.

### Conclusion

Sufi materials yield an overwhelming number of references made to Jesus, which include both the image of the Muslim Jesus (the prophet and messiah) as well as distinct Christian citations (Christ and the Spirit/Son of God). This article thus attempted to analyse the overarching representation of Jesus in Islamic mysticism, to demonstrate that Sufism sits firmly within the Islamic worldview, and more importantly to illustrate the mystical view as discerned from its Christian counterpart. Through an examination of the ‘Sufi Jesus,’ a more lucid image of Jesus in Islamic and Sufi literature is revealed.

The doctrine of love becomes for Sufism a “creative symbolic process”<sup>84</sup> that preserves within it the experience of birth, death, and union, all of which are manifested in the doctrine of the ‘Perfect Man.’ Jesus is placed among the ranks of ‘perfect men,’ the Islamic prophets, of whom Muhammad is the most perfect. For the Sufis, Jesus is undeniably a Muslim made into the literary emblem of mystical virtues. The ‘Sufi Jesus’ is thus the mystical configuration of the Qur’anic Jesus, an account deemed superior to biblical exegesis. Although there are instances in which descriptions of the Christian Jesus finds its way into Sufi works, all Sufi representations of Christ conform to Islamic doctrine that seem to touch the very limits of Islamic representation; Sufi representations of Jesus are indeed surprising to both the Muslim and Christian. This is where Jesus is presented as a redemptive figure of cosmic proportions, albeit, one whose ‘extraordinariness’ is not taken as a marker of exclusivity. Within limits, the ‘Sufi Jesus’ can indeed serve as a diplomatic avenue for religious dialogue in the current climate, but it remains that the medieval Sufi was more likely interested in conversion than mutual discourse. Attempts to convey the mystics otherwise is to enter the paradigm of New Age discourse within the topic of Neo-Sufism(s).

At the heart of Sufi literature, Jesus is the figurative expression of a real transformative event: *annihilation and subsistence in God*. Jesus becomes part of the mystical experience in such a way that he facilitates the process of ‘exchange’ between God and man. The works of Ibn al-‘Arabi and Rumi resonate with this mystically charged Jesus where the notion of a ‘Sufi Jesus’ is

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<sup>83</sup> See Nurbakhsh, *Jesus*, p. 52.

<sup>84</sup> See Urubshurov, ‘Heiropnic History,’ p. 24.

fully brought to bear. With the literary appropriation of al-Hallaj, the Sufis perpetuate the spiritual biography of Jesus as the *martyr of love*.

**Appendix: The Crucifixion of al-Hallaj**<sup>85</sup>

It is attested that it was in fact from fear of a riot, which the Caliph (who was in reality prodded by Hamid) shouted, "Kill him, or beat him with sticks until he retracts." He was beaten with sticks three hundred times. At each blow a clear voice was heard saying, "Do not be afraid, son of Mansour!" They then took him out to be crucified. Weighed down with thirteen chains, al-Hallaj strutted proudly waving his hands in the air like a beggar. "Why do you stand so proudly?" they asked him. "Because I am on my way to the slaughterhouse," he answered. The description that follows includes details of his apparel (a loincloth and a mantle over his shoulders), his prayer towards Mecca, his communing with God, his ascent onto the gibbet, and his acceptance of death as a sign of the crowd's "belief in one God to uphold the strictness of the Law." He was then stoned by the crowd. The executioners cut off his hands, then his feet, then they plucked out his eyes; he was stoned again, then they cut off his ears and nose. He uttered his forgiveness of them as they were preparing to cut out his tongue. An old woman shouted, "What right has this little woolcarder (*al-hallaj*) to speak of God?" Thereafter, he uttered, "It is enough for the lover to (diminish himself) before the uniqueness of the One." Then his tongue was cut out, and, finally, he was beheaded at the time of the evening prayer. The next day his limbs were burned and his ashes thrown into the Tigris.

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<sup>85</sup> Author's abridgement of Attar's account. See Arberry, *Muslim Saints*, pp. 268-71.