

CHAPTER FOUR

THE “INTOXICATED” MYSTICISM OF AL-BIṢṬĀMĪ AND AL-ḤALLĀJ

The importance of al-Ḥallāj’s trial and execution for the subsequent history of Islamic mysticism warrants a closer look into the phenomenon that medieval Muslim authors describe as the “intoxicated”, or “extreme,” trend within Sufism. It is traditionally associated with the names of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875) and al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj, although, as we shall see, their mystical ravings varied considerably and represented two distinctive types of mystical experience.¹ In the final analysis, however, their ideas and imagery are quite consistent with those of the advocates of divine love who were discussed in the previous chapter. As mentioned, for a time al-Shiblī attached himself to al-Ḥallāj, and it seems likely that many other mystics in al-Junayd’s entourage would have eagerly endorsed many of the “blasphemous” statements which were cited as the reason for his tragic death. Moreover, al-Ḥallāj’s “intoxicated” counterpart in Persia, al-Biṣṭāmī, was no less bold in describing his face-to-face encounters with God.² Yet, as al-Shiblī and other bards of divine love, al-Biṣṭāmī enjoyed great popularity and respect in his native town and died peacefully in his bed. What sets al-Ḥallāj apart from them all is his unwillingness to dissimulate his true convictions at a time when the Muslim community was beset by a host of external and internal crises, notably, the crumbling and discredit of the caliph’s authority and the depredations of the Qarmaṭīs (Carmathians) on the very doorstep of the capital. Furthermore, it has been suggested that there is much more to al-Ḥallāj’s story than meets the eye and that he, in all probability, owed his death as much to the courtly intrigue, the conspiratorial outlook of the capital’s populace and the intense jockeying for power at the caliph’s court as he did to his daring ideas and ecstatic locutions.³ Here, however, it is not

¹ Massignon, *Essay*, pp. 191–192.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 185–189.

³ See, e.g. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, pp. 102–110 and 133–145.

the place to "deconstruct" the traditional portrait of al-Ḥallāj, which has been carefully crafted by later Sufi historiography and which continues to shape our understanding of his extraordinary career and tragic death.

One of the most celebrated mystics of all times, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī was born in the town of Bisṭām in northern Persia, where he remained throughout his life, except for a few brief spells in exile (due to the hostility of an influential local *faqīh*) and during his pilgrimages to Mecca. Unlike most of the Sufis we have discussed, Abū Yazīd was a loner who was not affiliated with any mystical or theological school. His adherence to the Ḥanafī school of law, which was predominant in that part of the Muslim world, seems to have been nominal.⁴ In any event, it left no visible imprint on his legacy that is mystical through and through. Some sources portray him a covert Shīʿī, but the authenticity of such reports is impossible to ascertain.⁵ Al-Bisṭāmī presents himself as a typical reclusive mystic: he shunned the company of men and spent much time in an isolated cell or in his home, engaging in meditation and rigorous ascetic exercises. His parents appear to have exerted a major formative influence on his personality, as attested by some moving stories about his relationship with his righteous mother.⁶ He is also said to have corresponded with Dhu 'l-Nūn and cultivated friendship with Sarī al-Saqaṭī. His study of the "self-annihilation in [the contemplation] of divine unity" (*al-fanā' fī 'l-tawḥīd*) under the guidance of an enigmatic mystic Abū 'Alī al-Sindī, who knew neither Arabic nor the obligatory duties of Islam, gave rise to an intense academic speculation about the possible impact of Indian monistic philosophy on his mystical thought.⁷ This hypothesis, however, remains very tenuous. There is little in his teaching that we do not find in the sayings and poetry of his Islamic predecessors. As for his pioneering account (at least in Sufi literature) of his miraculous ascent through the heavenly spheres into the presence of God, it is closely patterned on Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* experience, alluded to in Qur'ān 17:1, 17:60

⁴ Massignon, *Essay*, p. 185.

⁵ R. Deladrière, "Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī et son enseignement spirituel," in: *Arabica*, vol. 14 (1967), pp. 79–80.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

⁷ Al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, p. 325; Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, pp. 35–37; Molé, *Mystiques*, pp. 24–25.

and 53:10–14, and elaborated in great detail by Muslim exegetes.⁸ Since this account is, in large part, responsible for al-Bisṭāmī's posthumous notoriety, I can do no better than to quote it in A. Arberry's translation:⁹

I saw that my spirit was borne to the heavens. It looked at nothing and gave no heed, though Paradise and Hell were displayed to it, for it was freed of [apparent] phenomena and veils. Then I became a bird, whose body was of Oneness and whose wings were of Everlastingness, and I continued to fly in the air of the Absolute, until I passed into the sphere of Purification, and gazed upon the field of Eternity and beheld there the tree of Oneness. When I looked, I myself was all those. I cried: "O Lord, with my I-ness I cannot attain to Thee, and I cannot escape from my selfhood. What am I to do?" God spake: "O Abū Yazīd, thou must win release from thy thou-ness by following my Beloved (sc. Muḥammad). Smear thine eyes with the dust of his feet and follow him continually."

In describing one of his most intense (and controversial) encounters with the Divine Reality (*al-ḥaqq*) al-Bisṭāmī says:¹⁰

I gazed upon Him with the eye of truth, and said to Him: "Who is this?" He said: "This is neither I nor other than I. There is no God but I." Then he changed me out of my identity into His Selfhood . . . Then I . . . communed with Him with the tongue of His grace, saying: "How fares it with me with Thee?" He said: "I am Thine through thee: there is no God but Thou."

This unusual religious experience exemplifies a famous state of consciousness which can be described as the reversal of roles, that is, a state in which "the worshipper plays the part of God and God that of the worshipper." In such a state, "the personal identity [of the mystic] is put in question and yet at the same time [his] consciousness is extraordinary intense."¹¹ In this and many similar ecstatic utterances (*shaṭaḥāt*; sing. *shaṭḥ*),¹² al-Bisṭāmī describes himself as confronting God, after having peeled off all of his self-centered preoccupations by means of spectacular ascetic feats. In this state nothing

⁸ Van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 4, pp. 387–395.

⁹ I have made slight emendations to Arberry's text, Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 54–55.

¹⁰ I quote Arberry's translation in Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1, p. 404.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 405; cf. A. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam*, London-New York, 1957, pp. 100–101 and Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, 44–45.

¹² Concerning this term describing the state in which the mystic gives voice to his most intimate experience, which may lay him open to accusations of heresy and unbelief, see *ibid.*, *passim*; cf. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, Kuwait, 1976.

exists except he and God; the all-important borderline between the human self and the Divine Absolute is blurred and eventually vanishes altogether, resulting in a complete, undifferentiated union of both.¹³

Once He raised me and stationed me before Him, and said to me, "O Abū Yazīd, truly My creatures desire to see thee." I said, "Adorn me in Thy Unity, and clothe in Thy Selfhood, and raise me up to Thy Oneness, so that when Thy creatures see me they will say, "We have seen Thee: and Thou will be That, and I shall not be there at all."¹⁴

This and similar mystical paradoxes prefigure the doctrine of *fanā'* that, as we have seen, was brought to fruition by the Baghdad mystics al-Junayd and al-Kharrāz. Al-Bisṭāmī's teaching therefore may be seen as marking a momentous transition from the ascetic preoccupation with the service of God (and the concomitant emphasis on world-renouncing piety) to a genuinely mystical experience of the total annihilation of the human self in God. This experience informs al-Bisṭāmī's intemperate utterances, such as "Glory be to me!¹⁵ How great is My majesty;" "Thy obedience to me is greater than my obedience to Thee;" "I am the [divine] throne and the footstool;" "I saw the Ka'ba walking round me;" "I am I, and there is no God but I," etc. Such bold proclamations, which sprang from al-Bisṭāmī's overwhelming experience of union with the Divine, became a grave embarrassment to his more "sober" counterparts in Baghdad, "until they developed the technique of interpreting them as innocent of the blasphemy that to the uninitiated seemed all too apparent in them."¹⁶ Al-Junayd, who is said to have translated al-Bisṭāmī's daring paradoxes from Persian into Arabic, had to bend over backwards in an attempt to prove their religious propriety in a commentary that was explicitly designed to allay the suspicions of literalist scholars.¹⁷ According to al-Junayd, the experience of *fanā'* is an inferior state. It should eventually be replaced by the mystic's "return" to this world and its inhabitants, so that he could impart to them the gnosis which he acquired directly from God. Al-Junayd dubbed this superior mystical state "survival," or "subsistence," (*baqā'*) in God,

¹³ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1, p. 405.

¹⁴ Badawī, *Shaṭaḥāt*, p. 28.

¹⁵ *Subḥānī*, a phrase commonly applied only to God.

¹⁶ Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 54.

¹⁷ Al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, pp. 380–393.

equating it with “sobriety after the overpowering drunkenness of ecstasy.”¹⁸ Al-Junayd’s *fanā’/baqā’* dichotomy went a long way in making these controversial concepts acceptable to the scholarly establishment, although even his ingenuity failed to convince many conservative scholars of the legitimacy of Sufi unitive experience. The impact of al-Junayd’s apologia for Sufi experience was considerably weakened by al-Ḥallāj’s trial and execution which demonstrated a dramatic rift between the communal spirit promoted by the Sunnī ulema and the disruptive individualistic outbursts fostered by some radical mystics. Some later Sufi authors, for instance al-Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077), routinely juxtaposed the sobriety and conformist attitude of al-Junayd and his followers (*al-junaydiyya*) with the intoxication and ecstatic behavior characteristic of al-Biṣṭāmī and his adherents (*al-ṭayfūrīyya*, after Abū Yazīd’s given name, Ṭayfūr).¹⁹ Another great representative of the “drunken” trend within Sufism, al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), was directly responsible for the widening of this rift.

Al-Ḥallāj’s life, teaching and tragic death is seen by many Muslim and Western scholars as a turning point in the history of Islamic mysticism, if not of the Muslim religion as a whole. Al-Ḥallāj was born around 244/857 at Ṭūr, in the Persian province of Fars. His father, a wool-carder (*ḥallāj*) by profession, left Ṭūr for the textile region between Tustar and Wāsiṭ. The family settled in Wāsiṭ (on the Tigris river), a town with a predominantly Sunnī-Ḥanbalī population. There al-Ḥallāj received a solid training in the traditional Muslim sciences. He distinguished himself as an expert on the Qur’ān, which he learned by heart by the age of twelve. Already at that early stage of his life he began to concern himself with an inner meaning of the Qur’ānic text. When, at the age of twenty, he left Wāsiṭ for Baṣra, he attached himself to the followers of the famous Sufi exegete Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896). While in Baṣra al-Ḥallāj received the habit of the Sufis (*khirqā*) from ‘Amr al-Makkī, and married Umm al-Ḥusayn, the daughter of the renowned Sufi master Abū Ya’qūb al-Aqṭa’, who gave birth to his three sons and daughter. Al-Ḥallāj did not take any other wives. When he traveled away from home, al-Ḥallāj left his family in the custody of his brother-in-law, who belonged to the Karnabā’ī family. Through him al-

¹⁸ Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Nicholson, *The Kashf al-mahjūb*, pp. 184–188.

Ḥallāj was, for a short time, affiliated with a clan that supported the Shīʿī-based rebellion of the Zanj, the predominantly black slaves who were employed in the sugar plantations and salt marshes of southern Iraq. This episode loomed large in the later accusations against al-Ḥallāj. His accusers presented him, inaccurately it seems, as a missionary (*dāʿī*) on behalf of the Ismāʿīlīs, or Qarmaṭīs, who operated in Arabia and Southern Iraq. Although he may have been influenced by some Shīʿī or Ismāʿīlī ideas, he remained profoundly loyal to Sunnism and continued to lead, at Baṣra, the life of an ascetic and devotee. Shortly before the Zanj rebellion was quashed by the caliphal troops, he departed for Baghdad, where he struck up friendship with al-Junayd and became a disciple of al-Nūrī.²⁰ After the brutal suppression of the Zanj rebellion by the caliph's forces, he set off for Mecca on a pilgrimage.

On reaching the holy city, al-Ḥallāj made a vow to remain for one year in the courtyard of the sanctuary, subjecting himself to spectacular acts of penitence and perpetual fasting. Throughout that period, he observed a vow of silence and engaged in arduous ascetic exercises and intense meditation. These extraordinary ascetic feats soon bore fruit as he began to feel that he had achieved a spiritual union with God. Contrary to the discipline of secrecy recommended by sober Sufi masters, he made his experience public. As a result, he was disowned by his former teachers, including ʿAmr al-Makkī, who had warned him that such experiences should not be divulged to the uninitiated. Although al-Ḥallāj's fellow Sufis rejected him, his fiery preaching of divine love won him a broad popular following.

On his part, to demonstrate his total break with his former Sufi teachers and associates, upon returning to Iraq, al-Ḥallāj gave up the traditional Sufi dress and adopted a lay habit (*qabā*) that was usually worn by soldiers. This was a symbolic gesture that was deemed to demonstrate that al-Ḥallāj no longer considered himself bound by the Sufi conventions which strictly prohibited a public discussion of the union between man and the Divine. In his public sermons al-Ḥallāj called upon his audience to find God within their hearts, the idea that earned him the nickname *Ḥallāj al-asrār* ("The Carder of the Consciences"). His public ministry aroused the hatred of the religious and temporary authorities of the age and further alienated

²⁰ Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, p. 102.

from him his former associates and masters among the Sufis of Baghdad. At the same time, he made friends with some powerful 'Abbāsid courtiers who responded to his teaching with enthusiasm and became his disciples. Their patronage of the controversial Sufi caused resentment among an influential faction of Mu'tazilī and Shī'ī leaders who accused him of deception and of practicing false miracles. His powerful foes incited the mob against him, causing him to leave Iraq for Khurāsān. Undeterred by his exile, al-Ḥallāj continued to spread his message among the Arab settlers of Khurāsān for five years. For some time, he resided in the fortified ascetic lodges which housed volunteer fighters in the holy war against the "pagan" populations of eastern Iran and Central Asia. Upon his return to Iraq, he moved to Baghdad together with his family.

His fame now had grown so that when he set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca for a second time, a cohort of four hundred disciples joined him. Soon after al-Ḥallāj had arrived in the holy city, he ran afoul of the local scholars and Sufis who accused him of magic and sorcery as well as of making a pact with the *jinn*. These accusations do not seem to have detracted from his popularity among the common folk. After returning from his second *hajj*, he undertook a long journey to India and Turkestan, where he may have been exposed to the influence of Hinduism, Manichaeism and Buddhism. About 290/902, al-Ḥallāj returned to Mecca for his third and last pilgrimage. Clad in the *muraqqa'a*, a piece of patched cloth thrown round his shoulders, with an Indian loin-cloth round his waist, he prayed God to reduce him to nothingness, to render him despised and rejected. At the same time, he called upon God to proclaim himself through the heart and the lips of his servant.

Upon joining his family in Baghdad, al-Ḥallāj behaved erratically. At night he prayed in the cemeteries and in the daytime he proclaimed in the streets and the bazaars his burning love of God and his desire to die at the hands of his fellow believers. On several occasions, he called upon his listeners to save him from God by putting him to a cruel death. Furthermore, he provoked a public scandal by setting up in the yard of his house a model of the Ka'ba sanctuary and by circumambulating it during the pilgrimage season. Al-Ḥallāj's actions and preaching aroused popular emotion and caused anxiety among the educated classes. The famous Zāhirī scholar Muḥammad b. Dāwūd strongly denounced his statements that asserted the possibility of mutual love between God and man and demanded

his execution.²¹ His legal ruling was contested by the Shāfiʿī jurist Ibn Surayj, who maintained that mystic inspiration fell outside the jurisdiction of the courts. It was in this period that, according to a hostile account, al-Ḥallāj replied to al-Shiblī, in the mosque of al-Manṣūr, by probably the most famous ecstatic utterance: *anā ʿl-ḥaqq*, "I am the Truth [i.e., God]," implying that he had achieved a complete identification with the Divine.

Al-Ḥallāj's public preaching set on foot a broad popular movement aimed at a moral reform of the community. His condemnation of social inequities and injustices had long-ranging political implications which irritated the religious and military authorities of the ʿAbbāsīd capital. At the same time, those who believed in his mission proclaimed him the hidden spiritual Pole of his epoch (*quṭb al-zamān*). Apart from the masses of Baghdad, who continued to respond to his preaching with great enthusiasm, he was able to win the powerful viziers, Ibn Ḥamdān and Ibn ʿĪsā, over to his cause. His involvement in the courtly intrigues made him many influential enemies as well. In 296/908, following an unsuccessful coup d'état and the restoration of the infant caliph al-Muqtadir, al-Ḥallāj found himself among the enemies of the newly appointed vizier, the powerful Shīʿī financier Ibn al-Furāt. Although initially he was able to escape Ibn al-Furāt's wrath by fleeing to Sūs in the province of Ahwāz, three years later he was apprehended and brought back to Baghdad. This time he fell victim to the hatred of the Sunnī governor of Wāsiṭ, Ḥāmid, who would later preside over al-Ḥallāj's last trial. Accused of claiming divine lordship and preaching incarnationism (*ḥulūl*), he was thrown in prison in Baghdad, where he remained for nine years.

In 301/913, the cultured vizier Ibn ʿĪsā, cousin of one of al-Ḥallāj's disciples, threw out evidence against al-Ḥallāj as fabricated and ordered his imprisoned supporters to be released. Nevertheless, succumbing to pressure from al-Ḥallāj's enemies, including the chief of the Baghdad police, the vizier was unable to forestall a public humiliation of his Sufi protégé: al-Ḥallāj was exposed on the pillory for four days, while the crier announced, "Behold, here is the missionary of the Qarmaṭīs!" In the following years he remained imprisoned, mostly at the caliph's palace, where he preached his message to other prisoners. Further attempts to put him on trial floundered

²¹ Ibid.

due to the support of some of the caliph's courtiers as well as the queen mother Shaghab.²² In 303/915, he cured the caliph of a fever; two years later he restored to life the crown prince's favorite parrot. These healing miracles assured al-Ḥallāj the protection of an influential clan of the caliph's family which was headed by the queen mother. During this period of relative calm and security al-Ḥallāj wrote his most important works, the *Ṭā sīn al-azal*, a meditation on the tragic fate of Satan (*Iblīs*) who valiantly refused to bow to any one else than God; and a short account of the prophet Muḥammad's miraculous ascension (*mi'rāj*) to heaven in the course of which, according to the Muslim tradition, the prophet contemplated God from the distance of "two bow-shots or nearer."²³

Al-Ḥallāj spent the last years of his life in prison at the caliph's court. In 308–9/921–2 he was finally brought to trial at the instance of Ḥāmid, who was probably anxious to diminish the influence of al-Ḥallāj's supporters at the caliph's court. The vizier's campaign to condemn al-Ḥallāj as a dangerous heretic was supported by Ibn Mujāhid, the respected head of the Qur'ān-readers guild of Baghdad. Although Ibn Mujāhid associated with some leading Sufis of the time, including Ibn Sālim and al-Shiblī, he was no friend of al-Ḥallāj's, whose preaching, as mentioned, was strongly denounced by the Sufi leaders of the age. The Sufi exegete Ibn 'Aṭā',²⁴ supported by some Ḥanbalī scholars, organized popular demonstrations against Ḥāmid's fiscal policy, probably in hopes of forcing him to release al-Ḥallāj. Ḥāmid, however, stood firm. Moreover, these popular protests gave Ḥāmid the pretext to request that Ibn 'Aṭā' appear before the tribunal. When he refused to testify against al-Ḥallāj and boldly insisted that the vizier had no right to condemn one of "God's friends," the irate Ḥāmid unleashed on him the caliph's retainers who brutally beat him to death with his own sandals.²⁵

Ḥāmid and the Mālikī *qāḍī* Abū 'Umar Ibn Yūsuf, who always supported those in power at the time, made sure that the tribunal pass a death verdict on al-Ḥallāj. By citing al-Ḥallāj's statement that one should "circumambulate the Ka'ba of the heart seven times," the *qāḍī* declared it to be an invitation to dispense with the

²² Ibid., p. 104.

²³ Qur'ān, 53:9.

²⁴ On him see Nwyia, *Trois oeuvres*, pp. 25–182.

²⁵ Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, pp. 105–106.

obligation of the *ḥajj* and accused him of being a Qarmaṭī (Carmathian) missionary, plotting to destroy the Meccan sanctuary. Citing the absence of a representative of the Shāfiʿī school at the trial, the Ḥanafī judge declined to endorse death warrant. However, his assistant supported Abū ʿUmar Ibn Yūsuf and the syndic of the professional witnesses succeeded in producing eighty-four signatories. Sitting in judgement, Abū ʿUmar, urged by Ḥāmid, pronounced the formula, "It is lawful to shed your blood."

For two days the grand chamberlain Naṣr and the queen mother tried to intercede with the caliph, who, stricken with a fever, ordered the execution to be delayed. However, the vizier was eventually able to convince the ruler to proceed with the execution. A legend has it that he prevailed over al-Muqtadir's hesitation by putting forward the following argument: "If he is not put to death, he will change the religious law, and everyone will apostatize because of him. This will inevitably lead to the destruction of your state."²⁶ On the next day, at Bāb Khurāsān in the presence of "an enormous crowd" al-Ḥallāj was severely beaten, then exposed, still alive, on a gibbet (*ṣalīb*). While rioters set fire to the shops, friends and enemies questioned him as he hung on the gibbet. Some of his replies were taken down by those present and later circulated along with other narratives related to his "passion." The caliph's warrant for his decapitation did not arrive until nightfall, therefore his final execution was postponed for another twenty-four hours. During the night rumors of wonders and supernatural happenings spread among the population of Baghdad, laying the grounds for a popular riot. Jolted into action by the danger of a major social upheaval, al-Ḥallāj's accusers hastened to sign his condemnation and to make the following announcement: "It is [done] for the sake of Islam; let his blood be on our heads." Al-Ḥallāj's head fell, his body was sprinkled with oil and burned, whereupon his ashes were cast into the Tigris from the top of a minaret (March 27, 922).

Al-Ḥallāj's trial took place against the background of the religious, political and financial intrigues at the ʿAbbāsīd court which grew especially intense during the minority of al-Muqtadir. It illustrates the great power enjoyed by the caliph's viziers at the turn of the fourth/tenth centuries. Al-Ḥallāj's two main prosecutors were the Shīʿī vizier Ibn

²⁶ Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār al-muḥāḍara*. Ed. by ʿAbbūd al-Shaljī, Beirut, 1971, vol. 1, p. 164; cf. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, p. 107.

al-Furāt and, later on, his Sunnī successor Ḥāmid. Al-Ḥallāj's appeals for a moral and spiritual reform of Islam, combined with his advocacy for social justice struck fear in the hearts of the upper classes of the capital. His preaching in the streets and bazaars of Baghdad was interpreted as sedition and rabble-rousing by many high-ranking secular and religious officials, especially the Mālikīs and the Ḥanafīs, who were instrumental in bringing about his execution. Surprisingly, al-Ḥallāj's strongest supporters seem to have been the Ḥanbalīs who had considerable influence on the common people of Baghdad. Their support helps to explain why al-Ḥallāj survived several earlier trials. At the same time, his bold rejection of prudence and discipline of secrecy in dealing with the uninitiated members of the community led to his disavowal by his fellow Sufis, who were anxious to keep a low social profile following the trial against the proponents of divine love instigated by Ghulām Khalīl. Likewise, many Sufi leaders saw al-Ḥallāj's indulgence in public miracles as a quest for cheap popularity and an irresponsible use of the divine powers which God bestowed upon His elect friends.²⁷ Al-Ḥallāj's detractors, including some influential courtiers of a Mu'tazilī slant, blamed him for staging his miracles in order to achieve ulterior goals.²⁸ Finally, his bold proclamation of his union with God insulted many mainstream scholars, who accused him of blasphemy and of claims to *ḥulūl* (a substantial union with God similar to the Christian theory of incarnation). In a similar vein, his emphasis on the inner significance of ritual acts, such as the *ḥajj* and the prayer, was interpreted by some literalist scholars as an attempt to abolish the acts themselves.

Even more crucial for al-Ḥallāj's tragic death was the troubled political atmosphere of the epoch which witnessed grave threats to the 'Abbāsīd state. On the home front, the dynasty was faced with a broad popular discontent that was fuelled by the irresponsible social and fiscal policies of the increasingly shaky government in Baghdad. Externally, the caliphate had to deal with the secession of the provinces and the rise of various chiliastic movements that operated on its very doorstep, in Lower Iraq, Eastern Arabia and in the Syrian Desert. Through his wife, al-Ḥallāj was linked to the Shī'ī rebellion of the Zanj; his travels to the distant lands were interpreted as being related

²⁷ Anawati and Gardet, *Mystique*, p. 38.

²⁸ Al-Tanūkhī, *Nishwār*, vol. 1, pp. 159–169.

to his agitation for the Qarmaṭī (Carmathian) cause. Such suspicions were further aggravated by his use of the themes and terminology that were current among the hated "extremist" Shī'ī groups.²⁹ All these facts gave his accusers the pretext to portray him as a fomenter of public discontent and a covert Qarmaṭī agent intent on destroying the Meccan sanctuary.³⁰ Finally, there are reasons to believe that during the last years of his life al-Ḥallāj actively sought martyrdom, viewing it as a means to achieve the absolute union with God through love and suffering. In any event, his defiant behavior during the trial certainly did not help his case.

Al-Ḥallāj left behind a great number of statements in poetry and prose. They were carefully collected by his disciples and edited by later Sufi writers, such as Ibn Khafīf (d. 371/982) and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209). Additionally, he composed a few short treatises, some of which have come down to us. Both the sayings and the treatises elaborate on the already familiar theme of the union of man and God, in the course of which God witnesses himself in the heart of his faithful worshipper (*ʿābid*). This union, or joining (*jamʿ*), leads to a unification (*ittiḥād*) which al-Ḥallāj presented not as a union of two substances, but as an act of faith and love (*ʿishq, maḥabba*). In attempting to account for this sensation, al-Ḥallāj made the following bold statements: "Thy Spirit has mingled itself with my spirit as ambergris mixes with fragrant musk;" "We are two spirits that reside (*ḥalalnā*) in a single body." This line of thinking reaches its culmination in the poetic lines that became emblematic of al-Ḥallāj's entire teaching:

Glory be to Him whose humanity manifested
The secret of His piercing Divinity's radiance
And Who then appeared openly in His creation
In the form of one who eats and drinks³¹

Little wonder that such declarations made al-Ḥallāj liable to accusations of incarnationism (*ḥulūl*) which were indeed cited during his trial. Whether he was referring here to the union of two substances, the human (*nāsūt*) and the divine (*lāhūt*), or simply to the union of the human and divine will remains unclear.³²

²⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 162–163.

³¹ Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, p. 53.

³² L. Massignon, *Akhbār al-Ḥallāj*, Paris, 1936, passim.

Another major theme of al-Ḥallāj's works addresses the tragic fate of Satan (*Iblīs*), whom God punished for his bold refusal to pay obeisance to anyone else but him.³³ Contrary, to the Muslim dogma, which unequivocally condemns Satan's arrogant refusal to follow God's command, in al-Ḥallāj's interpretation, Iblīs presents himself as "a tragic, martyr figure, who, despite his dedicated preaching [of God's oneness], perfect monotheism and eternal loyalty, suffers destruction at the hands of God, whom he lovingly worships."³⁴

This idea is thrown into high relief in the following passage from al-Ḥallāj's treatise *Kitāb al-tawāsīn*:

There was no monotheist like Iblīs among the inhabitants of the heavens. When the [human] essence revealed itself to him in stunning glory, he renounced even a glance at it and worshiped God in ascetic isolation. . . . God said to him, "Bow!" he replied, "To no other!" He said to him, "Even if My curse be upon you?" He cried out, "To no other!"³⁵

Al-Ḥallāj's daring portrayal of Iblīs as the model monotheist did not fail to scandalise most of his fellow Sufis, not to mention the majority of Muslim scholars, who denounced it as a blatant heresy. As with al-Junayd's interpretations of al-Bisṭāmī's "ecstatic utterances," later Sufi writers had to exercise their ingenuity to bring al-Ḥallāj's interpretation of the Iblīs episode in line with the standards of conventional exegesis, according to which Iblīs was an archetypal sinner, driven by his proverbial hubris.

L. Massignon's painstaking analysis of al-Ḥallāj's posthumous influence³⁶ absolves me from the necessity to dwell on this topic. Suffice it to say that his legacy intricately combines the elements of the Middle Eastern esoteric lore—namely, neo-Platonic metaphysics, gnosticism, and the cabbalistic speculation on the meaning of letters and numbers—with Qur'ānic imagery and terminology. The end product is an exotic and paradoxical teaching that was too bold even for al-Ḥallāj's Sufi contemporaries, to say nothing of exoterically minded scholars and secular authorities. Whether it served as a mere pretext or as the principal cause of his execution is immaterial.

After al-Ḥallāj's cruel death, some of his disciples went into hid-

³³ Qur'an, 38:71–85.

³⁴ P. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi psychology*, Leiden, 1993, p. 126.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

³⁶ L. Massignon, *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj*. Vol. 2. *The Survival of al-Ḥallāj*. Trans. by H. Mason, Princeton, 1982.

ing or dispersed. Others were apprehended and beheaded in Baghdad. Still others fled to Khurāsān and Central Asia, where they disseminated his teaching among local mystical groups. Through their efforts the "drunken" trend in Islamic mysticism was embraced and developed by a number of eminent Persian Sufis, such as Muḥammad al-Dastānī (d. 417/1026), al-Kharaqānī (d. 425/1033), Abū Saʿīd Ibn Abī 'l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), and Fārmadī (d. 477/1084), all of whom traced their spiritual genealogy back to either al-Biṣṭāmī or al-Ḥallāj, or both. Al-Ḥallāj's disciple, Ibn Khafīf of Shīrāz, founded an independent mystical school which combined the ascetic tradition of Persia with the speculative mysticism of the Baghdad school. To these Ibn Khafīf added some elements of nascent Ash'arī theology.³⁷

An attempt to exonerate al-Ḥallāj from accusations of heresy and to bring his ideas into the mainline of the Sufi tradition was made by the Central Asian Sufi author Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990 or 395/995) in his "Introduction to the Sufi Doctrine." His task was "to bridge the chasm between orthodox theology and Sufis, which the execution of al-Ḥallāj had greatly widened."³⁸ Characteristically, even though the thrust of al-Kalābādhī's argument is clearly directed toward the defense of al-Ḥallāj, he did not dare to cite him openly.³⁹ Throughout his treatise, the statements of the great Sufi martyr are quoted anonymously—a clear indication that the dramatic memories of al-Ḥallāj's trial were still rankling among Sunnī scholars, most of whom remained leery of his teaching. Al-Ḥallāj and his followers, al-Ḥallājiyya, were strongly condemned by the Sufi apologist al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī (d. 465/1073 or 469/1077) of Ghazna, who, in his "Unveiling of That Which is Hidden," sought to separate "correct" Sufism from its "heretical" offshoots and thereby to render the former acceptable to Sunnī orthodoxy.⁴⁰

Up to the present day, Muslim scholars remain divided over the issue of al-Ḥallāj's status vis-à-vis the Sharī'a. Their opinions can be classified under three major headings: (a) condemnation, which ranged from a simple repudiation of his views to an unequivocal and final declaration of his disbelief (*takfīr*); (b) affirmation of his sainthood (*wilāya*), which ranged from the attempts to find an excuse (*i'tidhār*) for his behavior to an unconditional acceptance (*qabūl*); (c)

³⁷ Böwering, *Mystical Vision*, p. 93.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 23, *apud* A. Arberry.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nicholson, *Kashf*, pp. 130–131 and 260–266.

pious suspension of judgement (*tawaqquf*), which eventually became the position of the majority of Sunnī scholars.

In the West, opinions on al-Ḥallāj varied dramatically. Early Western students of his life and work, such as A. Müller and d'Herbelot, portrayed him as a secret Christian; Reiske accused him of blasphemy, Tholuck of abusing paradox; A. von Kremer considered him to be a monist of Indian inspiration, Kazanski dismissed him as a psychopath, while Browne depicted him as “a dangerous and able intriguer.”

L. Massignon, who spent the greater part of his life trying to piece together a comprehensive portrait of this Sufi master, saw in his personal experience the culmination of mystical life in Islam. After al-Ḥallāj's tragic death, in Massignon's opinion, Islamic spirituality never recovered and entered the period of a protracted and unrelieved decline. This decline found its dramatic expression in the “dispirited” philosophical monism of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, who, by intruding “alien” neo-Platonic elements into Islamic spirituality, irrevocably compromised its primeval experiential essence.⁴¹ Recent studies, including those by L. Massignon's own students, have demonstrated the tendentious and highly personal nature of this view of al-Ḥallāj's legacy. For instance, many of the themes and ideas, which Massignon considered to be original to his hero, had been articulated by his predecessors at Baṣra and Baghdad long before al-Ḥallāj appeared on the historical scene.⁴² Such findings, however, do not diminish his lasting influence on the entire history of Islamic mysticism. In fact, many later Sufis explicitly identified themselves with his (as well as al-Biṣṭāmī's) ecstatic, or “drunken,” spirituality, which they juxtaposed with the more conventional and “sober” mysticism of al-Junayd and his followers. What does set al-Ḥallāj apart from his predecessors and contemporaries, including al-Biṣṭāmī, was his uncompromising refusal to keep his daring experiences to himself. His involvement in the precarious politics of the court, combined with his bold temper and nonconformism, eventually led to his tragic death, endowing him with the halo of martyrdom that ensured his posthumous “survival” as an emblem of the mystical lover.

⁴¹ Massignon, *Essay*, pp. xxvii–xxix, 35, 56–57, etc.

⁴² See, e.g., Nwyia, *Exégèse*, pp. 10–14.

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By

Alexander Knysh



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