

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Concept of Love in Medieval Women's Mystical Experience: Revisiting the Works of Rābi'ā Al-ʿadawiyya and Mechthild of Magdeburg

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of love is not a new phenomenon in the history of mystical ideas. It features predominantly in all fields of knowledge, including literature, metaphysics, psychology, and law. However, in the Christian and Islamic worlds, it is also a theme that has been central to mysticism right from the very beginning. It is a truism to say that the history of mystical ideas would be severely lacking without exploring the element of divine love. Given that love is a common phenomenon shared by all human beings regardless of race,

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culture, and traditions, it serves as the perfect theme to investigate in the comparative study of mysticism. In this regard, this study seeks to elucidate the conversation about the contributions of medieval Christian and Muslim women to mysticism. In a bid to address the issue of androcentrism in contemporary mystical studies, this study will examine the works of two prominent medieval women mystics from both religions: Rābi‘a al-Adawiyyah, a Muslim; and Mechthild of Magdeburg, a Christian. This is in an attempt to understand how both women understood the concept of love; more so, how they employed it in relation to the divine. Using a comparative approach, this study will compare and contrast the application of the concept of love in the works of Rābi‘a al-Adawiyyah and Mechthild of Magdeburg while discussing the relevance of their contributions to the study of mysticism. By doing this, it is hoped that our general understanding of the Middle Ages would be better illuminated, thus, making for a greater acknowledgement of medieval literature in the field and adding to existing sources on the history of the study of religion.

**Keywords:** Love, women mystics, androcentrism, Rābi‘a al-Adawiyyah, Mechthild of Magdeburg, mysticism, Transcendent Being

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of love is not a new phenomenon in the history of mystical ideas. It features predominantly in all fields of knowledge, including literature, metaphysics, psychology, and law. However, in the Christian and Islamic worlds, it is also a theme that has been central to mysticism right from the very beginning. It is a truism to say that the history of mystical ideas would be severely lacking without exploring the element of divine love. Given that love is a common phenomenon shared by all human beings regardless of race, culture, and traditions, it serves as the perfect theme to investigate in the comparative study of mysticism. In early Christian and Islamic literature, the concept of love was a theme that was greatly explored by mystics in connection to the “Absolute Being.” Even though the practice was widely in circulation in the Christian world before the advent of Islam, it was not until the 8th century that divine love began to gain traction in the mystical traditions of the Islamic world. According to Leonard Lewisohn, one of the first Sufis who spoke of the concept of divine love in the Muslim world was Hassan al-Basri. However, a well-organized system of love only began to appear in the mystical literature of early Sufis in the 9th century; an idea that developed in the philosophical mysticism<sup>1</sup> of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya.<sup>2</sup> In Christian and Islamic mysticism, it is argued that the concept of divine love is an idea that is deeply rooted in the holy revelatory scriptures of both religious traditions; and while love itself is one of the divine attributes of God in Islam (*al-Wadūd*), words such as

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- 1 This paper adopts the term “philosophical mysticism” instead of “mystical theology” because both mystics exploration of love transcends the limits of a religious rationality associated with Islam or Christianity as a religion.
  - 2 Leonard Lewisohn, “Sufism’s Religion of Love, from Rabi ‘a to Ibn ‘Arabi,” *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (2015), 152.

“covenant” or “testament” are mostly employed to describe the love relationship that exists between the divine and his creation in the Christian mystical tradition. With the newly developed interest of modern scholars in the mystical traditions of both the East and West, the 20th century saw a growing concern in bringing the great classical mystical literature of the Christian and Muslim mystics into European consciousness. This was done by translating early mystical literature from their original languages, be it Hellenic or Arabic, into European languages; and in this regard modern works, such as *The Translation of Jalā al-Dīn Rumī’s Mathnawī* (1925) by Nicholson, *Meister Eckhart Sermons and Treaties* (1987) by Maurice Walshe, and the *I Ching* (1967) translated by Richard Wilhelm are noteworthy. More so, the modern mystical works of scholars such as Anne-Marie Schimmel<sup>3</sup> and Toshihiko Izutsu<sup>4</sup> within the Islamic world and Evelyn Underhill<sup>5</sup> from the Christian world are invaluable to enlightening modern students of mysticism about the history of mystical ideas in the Christian and Islamic worlds.

The history of the study of mysticism as a discipline is far from complete. Over the years, there has been a continued discussion over the androcentric bias that characterizes modern scholars’ exploration of the discipline, almost projecting the field as a male-dominated industry. Although this may, in part, be owing to the lack of familiarity with medieval literature on women mysticism, it may also be as a result of mere disinterest of the majority of modern scholars to explore the contributions of women to the discipline. I believe that medieval women’s mysticism has been understudied in modern mystical discourses and the need to revive the vast range of women’s voices that have been silenced over the course of many centuries has become imperative. In this study, I seek to elucidate the conversation about the contributions of medieval Christian and Muslim women to mysticism. It examines the works of two prominent medieval women mystics from both religions: Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, a Muslim; and Mechthild of Magdeburg, a Christian. This is in an attempt to examine how both women understood the concept of love, and in particular, how they employed it in relation to the divine. Using a comparative approach, this study also compares and contrasts the application of the concept of love in the works of Rābi‘a and Mechthild while discussing the relevance of their contributions to the study of mysticism. Through this study, we hope that our general understanding of the Middle Ages will be better illuminated, thus ensuring a greater acknowledgement of medieval literature in the field and adding to existing sources on the history of the study of religion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Deriving insight from the philosophical work of Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, which attempts to structurally compare between the worldviews of Sufism as represented

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3 See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

4 See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism—A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (University of California Press, 2016).

5 See Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (Wentworth Press, 2019).

by Ibn ‘Arabī and that of Taoism as represented by Lao-tzu<sup>6</sup>, this study also aims to follow the same course of reasoning. Therefore, rather than attempting an essentializing comparison between Islam and Christianity, I have aimed at a structural comparison of the concept of love in Sufism as represented by Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya and the concept of love in Christianity as represented by Mechthild of Magdeburg. With a significant awareness of the pitfalls that a comparison of this sort may attract, this paper circumvents a superficial analysis by laying bare the fundamental structure of each woman’s mystical position independently and objectively, before proceeding to highlight any comparative consideration.

## THE INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHIES OF RĀBI‘A AL-‘ADAWIYYA AND MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG

Two remarkable personalities in medieval women mysticism, Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 810) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1294), have preoccupied scholars of women’s religious history and spirituality for decades. A comprehensive intellectual biography of both Rābi‘a and Mechthild is pivotal to understanding their mystical ideas given that there is a significant correlation between the life experiences of both women mystics and their mystical experiences; Rābi‘a’s self-mortification in Basra and Mechthild’s asceticism in Magdeburg has had a significant bearing on their spiritual development. The criteria for selecting these two women were based on age, the medieval period, content, the similarities that are apparent in their mystical ideas, as well as religion (Christianity and Islam). The intellectual biographies of both the mystics are briefly discussed in the following subsections.

### Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya

The accounts of Rābi‘a’s life has been a subject of contentious debate in academia. This could be, in part, owing to the unavailability of credible sources on her life experiences, or the lack of familiarity with modern contemporary scholars of medieval literature. Some modern scholars have subjected Rābi‘a’s historical narratives to criticism. Scholars such as Julian Baldick have not only questioned the words or sayings ascribed to Rābi‘a in history but also the credibility of her existence in the history of women mysticism.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the continuous transmission of Rābi‘a’s stories throughout the ages is enough justification to prove Rābi‘a’s existence. Originating in the 8th century in the Arabian Peninsula, her name has featured in several written sources as she continues to be discussed as one of the prominent figures in the history of medieval women mysticism. Her stories not only attract the attention of scholars interested in Sufism but also those interested in the role that women played in Islam.

Rābi‘a was born into a financially challenged family in Basra between 95 and 99 A.H.

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6 See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism—a Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

7 Julian Baldick, “The Legend of Rābi‘a of Basra: Christian Antecedents, Muslim Counterparts,” *Religion* 20, no. 3 (1990): 29.

(714–718 A.D.). Her parents were devout Muslims, and along with her three elder sisters, they all lived on the outskirts of the Basran society in what is presently Iraq. She was named Rābi‘a by her parents, meaning “the fourth,” which translates correctly into the sequence of her birth as the fourth daughter of the family. Regarding her *kunyas*, “al-‘Adawiyya,” “al-Qaysiyya,” and “al-Basriyya,” these are titles that were either derived from her the tribe of Qays b. ‘Adi of which she was a member or from her place of birth, al-Basra.<sup>8</sup> She became an orphan at a very young age after which she was captured by bandits and as a result was sold into slavery along with her three sisters. She ended up in Baghdad with a master who treated her with disdain and cruelty. Given the incredible beauty of Rābi‘a and the number of marriage offers she received from different men in Baghdad, her master exploited her talent as a singer and her beauty by forcing her into entertaining people and he lived off her earnings. The story surrounding her freedom attracts divergent opinions; however, according to Suleyman Derin, after a miraculous event witnessed by her master, he was overwhelmed by it and freed her in the end.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, based on the above narration, it is believed that the hardship that Rābi‘a encountered right from infancy had a direct bearing on her spiritual development as a lover of God. Growing up as an orphan with no parental care whatsoever, as early as eleven years of age in an Islamic society where the idea of guardianship is stressed, deprived Rābi‘a of societal protection. She sought protection, instead, from the Most High, and replaced her loneliness with close proximity to the Divine Being. If not for the painful episode that characterized Rābi‘a’s early life, it may be argued that the Rābi‘a we now know may have never existed.

Rābi‘a lived a life of absolute devotion and worship, and although she, on the one hand, features as one of the founders of medieval Sufi asceticism, she stands as the original advocate of all later Sufi doctrines of divine love. Rābi‘a subscribed to an anti-marriage philosophy as she viewed marriage as an obstacle in the path of annihilating herself in the love of God; therefore, she rejected many marriage proposals including those of ‘Abd al-Wahīd b. Zayd (d. 793) and, arguably, Hasan al-Basri (d. 728; which although chronologically impossible, was narrated in more than one account). In response to ‘Abd al-Wahīd b. Zayd, Rābi‘a was recorded to have responded as follows, “O sensual one, seek another sensual one like yourself, have you seen any sign of desire in me?”<sup>10</sup> Her mystical idea of love pervaded the doctrines of Sufism for many centuries and continues to be reflected upon up until the present time. As Ibn Arabī rightly said, “She is the one who analyzes and classes the categories of love to the point of being the best interpreter of love.”<sup>11</sup>

Through her contributions, Rābi‘a infused the medieval atmosphere with her philosophical mysticism, and although she spent a significant period of her life in isolation,

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8 Derin Suleyman, “From Rabi’a to Ibn al-Farid: Towards Some Paradigms of the Sufi Conception of Love” (PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 1999), 112.

9 Suleyman, “From Rabi’a to Ibn al-Farid,” 114.

10 Suleyman, “From Rabi’a to Ibn al-Farid,” 116.

11 Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification and Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī* (London: Routledge, 2011), 25.

she had many disciples and contacts. Irrespective of the credibility of sources, Rābi'a's biography, as accounted in some hagiographic works, affirmed her contact with Hasan al-Basri, which according to Derin is highly unlikely. It was reported that she engaged in a number of mystical debates with several Sufis, one of whom was Hasan al-Baṣrī. Her philosophy of love transcended any other mystical ideas in the early period, and it was adopted by many over Hasan al-Baṣrī's gloomy approach to mysticism. Among her associates, according to Derin, was Rābi'a al-Qays of Basra (d. 810), Sufyān Thawrī (d. 798), and even Dhun al-Nūn al-Misrī (d. 856). As for disciples and followers, Muadh al-'Adawiyya, Umm al-Darda, Maryam of Basra, and many others are featured in hagiographic books.<sup>12</sup>

### Mechthild of Magdeburg

Defying the patriarchal establishment of the 13th century, a woman emerged who was a relatively significant figure in the history of medieval women thinkers and a prominent exponent of ascetic theology in Christian mysticism. Her name was Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1297). The details of her actual life are restricted to what appears in her collections, yet her stories continue to be transmitted among scholars of women's religious history and spirituality. She was born into an aristocratic Saxon family in the early period of the 13th century in 1208. The majority of the details surrounding Mechthild's life and spiritual development are from an extract of her masterpiece, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, translated from its original German format and introduced by Frank Tobin in 1997. This book represents the efforts of many decades, the completion of which became possible when Mechthild was already old, blind, and frail.

As early as twelve years of age, Mechthild had started receiving mystical experiences which she described as a divine greeting from the Holy Spirit. According to Beer, this loving greeting came to her every single day and caused her to experience a two-dimensional feeling of love and sorrow, the sweetness of which increased as the day passed.<sup>13</sup> The early stage of Mechthild's spiritual development was marked by a passionate desire to renounce worldly pleasures of all kinds in order to become one with Christ. In her struggle to liberate her body, she went far away from home to join the beguines in Magdeburg, which indicated her devotion and unwavering determination in the imitation of Christ. In her journey towards self-mortification, her contact with the mendicant orders of St. Dominic and St. Francis may have been an external influence. She not only shares the mendicant's asceticism and humility, but also its reformation zeal designed to combat the clerical corruptions of the time.

Mechthild commenced the writing of *The Flowing Light* around 1250, and a striking feature in this writing was her decision to write in German (her native tongue), rather than Latin. According to Beer, the 13th century period valued literary materials that were written in Latin, and scholars during this period subscribed to Latin as a language to

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12 Suleyman, "From Rabi'a to Ibn al-Farid," 120.

13 Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press, 1992), 81.

appeal to a bigger crowd. Mechthild, unlike the others, challenged the status quo and in doing so, boosted the Middle Low German language while making her work accessible to a more varied audience.<sup>14</sup> Mechthild's method of composition was to write in the manner in which she received the ecstatic vision, which was related in a prose-like manner, poetry, or on a long sheet preserved by her longtime Dominican friend Heinrich of Halle, who also provided valuable assistance in the course of writing the book.<sup>15</sup> Following the abrupt persecution of outspoken and reformist Christians by corrupt members of the clergy, she was forced to seek refuge in Helfa where she was welcomed and lived until she died in 1297.

## THE CONCEPT OF LOVE IN MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MYSTICAL TRADITION: RĀBI'Ā AL-'ADAWIYYA AND MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG

The history of medieval women's mystical tradition is a long and substantial one, and it would be impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of knowledge exhibited by these medieval women mystics within the scope of this study. For the purpose of this study, two distinguished women mystics of the Middle Ages who were not only unique in the history of their own faith but also in their respective age as well were chosen. The paragraphs that follow structurally and comparatively examine the concept of love in the philosophical mysticism of Rābi'ā al-'Adawiyya and Mechthild of Magdeburg to illustrate the different methodologies of love from two different religious traditions, and more importantly to deduce the point of convergence in both women's approach to mysticism.

### a. The Concept of Love in the Philosophical Mysticism of Rābi'ā al-'Adawiyya

It goes without saying that love is a complex phenomenon to classify; however, that has not deterred people from attempting to develop a philosophy of love within a mystical system. The concept of love constitutes an area of concern in early mystical discourse as well as among modern mystics; and given that the Sufis consistently subject love, as a phenomenon, to a mystical psychology of "stages" and "stations," the mystical classification of the stages of love has always attracted divergent views from the very beginning. Nonetheless, while the stages of love may be heavily contested in academia, one point of convergence among early Sufis was on "love" as the most important factor in establishing a human-divine connection.<sup>16</sup> Tracing the historical development of the classification of love in Islamic mysticism back to its origin, it is unsurprising to see many scholars designate Rābi'ā al-'Adawiyya as the major exponent of a well-organized theory

14 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 70.

15 Emily Hunter McGowin, "Eroticism and Pain in Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light*," *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1041 (2011): 608.

16 Carl Ernst, "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Rābi'ā to Rūzbihān," *The Heritage of Sufism* 1 (1999): 435.

of love in the history of Sufism. The selfless love of God advocated by Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya distinguishes her not only among her contemporaries but also her predecessors.

Within the context of the medieval period, Rābi‘a’s level of spirituality was unmatched in the history of medieval mystical practices, distinguished by the absolute renunciation of worldly desires, set apart in her unparalleled level of sincerity, and annihilated in the profound love and longing for God’s union. Her philosophical mysticism of love implied an exclusive and unconditional concentration on nothing else but God, an understanding that is captured in her response to Sufyan al-Thāwri when she was asked about the reality of her faith, “I have not worshipped Him from the fear of His fire nor for love of His garden so that I should be like a lowly hireling. Rather, I have worshipped Him for love of Him and longing for Him.”<sup>17</sup> This dictum captures the whole of Rābi‘a’s theoretic understanding of love, which leaves no room for the love of something else aside from Him. A testimony of her unwavering devotion to divine love is a famous story that was in circulation in Basra that talked about how Rābi‘a was on the street holding a torch in one hand and an ewer in the other. People wondered about why she was carrying these two items, and she said:

I want to throw fire into paradise and pour water into Hell so that these two veils disappear, and it becomes clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of hell or hope for paradise.<sup>18</sup>

The logic behind Rābi‘a’s saying is apparent in the obvious distinction between “creation” and “creator.” Anything created including paradise and hellfire is a distraction on the path to divine love, so that anyone who loves God for the sake of paradise or out of fear of Hell is not loving God per se but something else distinct from Him. Therefore, to love God for the sake of deriving benefits or avoiding disasters is a wrong perception of what divine love is meant to be. To enlighten the question of what divine love really is in the philosophical mysticism of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, it would have to be considered under two subheadings: God–Human design and Human–God design.

### *God–Human Design: Agape Love*

The God–Human design illustrates the love that originates from God towards His creation. While Rābi‘a did not preoccupy herself with the God–Human design, references to God’s love for humanity are scattered throughout her teachings. From Rābi‘a’s teaching, one can derive that the origin of love itself comes from God; for according to her, it would be impossible for love to exist in the first place without God serving as the primary source. This understanding of love is quite central to Rābi‘a’s philosophical mysticism and it is reflected in the way she approached issues of legal standing. According to Derin, Rābi‘a was faced with a question on whether or not the repentance of a sinner is always acceptable to God, and she replied, “No one can turn to God before He turns to them.”<sup>19</sup> Following

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17 Ernst, “The Stages of Love,” 438.

18 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 39.

19 Suleyman, “From Rabi‘a to Ibn al-Farid,” 124.

this logic, Rābi‘a established God as the sole inventor and originator of “love,” and the choice of either reciprocating the love or ignoring it ultimately lies with the creation.

Another element that features in the God–Human design is the principle of divine jealousy. In no other Sufi literature has God been qualified with such an adjective, and it appeared first in Rābi‘a’s teachings.<sup>20</sup> According to Rābi‘a, this understanding of divine jealousy informs the strict prohibition of *shirk* (associating a partner with God) in Islam, for God requires that His creation extends absolute love to only Him and nothing else. He is the kind of God that will not hesitate to punish anyone that shares with Him the love that is due to Him alone. In one of her excerpts, Rābi‘a addresses God as follows:

O Beloved of hearts, I have none like unto Thee,  
Therefore, have pity this day on the sinner who comes to Thee  
O my Hope and my Rest and my Delight  
The heart can love none other but Thee.<sup>21</sup>

The God–Human design indicates the downward trend by which love moves from the Ultimate Reality down to His creation, with God serving as the initiator of love while distributing it throughout the entire universe.

### *Human–God Design*

In direct contrast to the God–Human design, the Human–God design indicates an upward trend by which love travels from the creature to the creator. This dimension of love has been the area of concentration of many Sufis even before Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya; however, the one thing that sets her apart from her predecessors and contemporaries is her idea of an organized theory of love. This was particularly why the renowned Andalusian Sufi Scholar, Ibn Arabī, described Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya as “one who analyzes and classifies the categories of love to the point of being the most famous interpreter of love.”<sup>22</sup> Addressing Rābi‘a’s categories of love, her oft-quoted classification of love into two distinct forms constitute the fundamental elements of Rābi‘a’s philosophical mysticism. These two loves are the selfish love and the selfless love.

The *selfish love* (*hub al-hawā*) is a reward-motivated love that comes from the fear of or the desire to achieve something that will be of great benefit to an individual. It is not surprising to see or to think that many people fall under this category of love. This is because of the fact that it comes naturally for human beings to be selfish and for them to be paid in return for their service. However, Rābi‘a condemns this category of Human–God love relationship as she clearly relates in one of her poetries: “I have loved you with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy of You. As for the love which is selfish, I occupy myself therein with the remembrance of You to the exclusion of all others.”<sup>23</sup>

20 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 59.

21 Joseph Lumbard, “Love and Beauty in Sufism,” in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism* (Routledge, 2020), 173.

22 Ernst, “The Stages of Love,” 439.

23 Suleyman, “From Rabi‘a to Ibn al-Farid,” 125.

Even though Rābi'a was aware of the natural disposition of the selfish love in human beings, she argued that such love can be neutralized by annihilating oneself in the remembrance of God. In one of the anecdotes related to Rābi'a on selfish love, it was said that Rābi'a came across a group of elders, and she asked each one of them why they worship God. One replied for the fear of hell and another replied for the love of paradise; whereas Rābi'a replied, "He is an evil servant he who worships God from fear and terror or from the desire of reward."<sup>24</sup>

However, from a legal point of view, the love of God for the sake of material benefit is completely acceptable in Islam, for of what use is paradise or hell if not to serve as motivation to establish closer contact with God. If the Prophet is reported to have said, "Love God for His bounties on you,"<sup>25</sup> then Rābi'a may be considered as being excessive in her disapproval of "selfish love."

As for the *selfless love* of God (*al-Hub lillāh*), it assumes a very important position in the philosophical mysticism of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, perhaps the most significant of all. This type of love is what is known by the later Sufis as *ishq* (eros). The extraordinary and undivided love of God exhibited by Rābi'a in the 8th century Basra not only set an example during her age but is still strongly admired by contemporary Sufis. The selfless love for God denotes that nothing else is worthy of love except God; love that is immune to distraction for the lover of God sees nothing else but God even when his eyes are closed. The understanding of selfless love is better captured in Rābi'a's prayer:

O my Lord, whatever share of this world Thou dost bestow on me, bestow it on  
Thine enemies,  
and whatever share of the next world Thou doest give me, give it to Thy friends—  
Thou art enough for me.<sup>26</sup>

This line of prayer has been repeated in different forms and variations by Sufis throughout the ages, and it established Rābi'a as the face of divine love in the religious history and spirituality of medieval women.

Although selfless love is the final one in the stages of love and thus the best of them all, it is a level that is not easily attainable for it requires a complete renunciation of earthly desires and to be replaced with a profound love of God. The only thing that matters to the Gnostic is the hope of God and the word of His praise, which is sweeter than any word and a source of happiness for the soul.

When a lover finally becomes mired in the love of God, he will indirectly cease to exist and vacate the self. As al-Ghāzalī rightly explained, the natural inclination of the Gnostic towards personal wants and earthly materials disappears from his consciousness and he becomes fully annihilated in divine love. The body, heart, and soul of the seeker will be consumed with grace; and in that state, even if thrown into hellfire, he would not feel a thing for he has become one in spirit with God and immune to physical pain. This type of

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24 Suleyman, "From Rābi'a to Ibn al-Farid," 126.

25 Suleyman, "From Rābi'a to Ibn al-Farid," 126.

26 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 40.

love is not motivated by material benefit but by seeking his worthiness, as is transmitted in one of Rābi‘a’s famous prayers:

O my Lord! If I am worshipping You from fear of fire, burn me in the fires of hell; and if I am worshipping You from desire for paradise, deny me paradise. But if I am worshipping You for Yourself alone, then do not deny me the sight of Your magnanimous face.<sup>27</sup>

Rābi‘a was not the only woman mystic who chose the mystical path; several other women, some of whom were among her disciples and interlocutors, subscribed to the same understanding of divine love. However, unlike them, Rābi‘a exceeded them in scope and dimension, which consequently set her up as the model of selfless love in medieval women’s history of mysticism.

### **The Concept of Love in the Philosophical Mysticism of Mechthild of Magdeburg**

In the study of Christian medieval women mystics, two particular women have preoccupied modern scholars of female mysticism and spirituality: Hildegard of Bingen whose work provides valuable insight into contemporary thought; and Mechthild of Magdeburg who claimed that God inspired her work, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, and addressed God in ways that surpassed the usual boundary of divine love.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the combination of Mechthild’s concept of divine love and the alleged divine authorship of her book not only differentiate her from other medieval women mystics but also informs contemporary scholars’ preoccupation with her subject. It is this concept of love in Christian thought that is best captured in Mechthild’s work which, allegedly, is an inspired product of God himself.

Love and eroticism are two significant elements that factored greatly into Mechthild’s mystical teachings; and while many among her predecessors and contemporaries have explored the same mystical path,<sup>29</sup> the only facet that separates Mechthild’s application of erotic language and imagery from those that went before her was her “un-allegorical” intention. Her employment of sexually stimulating language to describe her relationship with Christ reflects actual human concupiscent drive and a way of gaining intimate proximity, thus becoming one with him. Her inclination towards divine eroticism is, as stated in her book, driven by a dream she had about the Mass of John the Baptist, subtitled, “An Allegory of Justification by Faith.”<sup>30</sup> In this dream-like vision, Mechthild met John the Baptist, St. Peter, and the Virgin Mary; and at the behest of Mother Mary, she took her communion, thus becoming one with Christ. This dream, according to Mechthild,

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27 Suleyman, “From Rabi’a to Ibn al-Farid,” 131.

28 Jane Duran, “Mechthild of Magdeburg: Women Philosophers and the Visionary Tradition,” *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 1007 (2006): 43.

29 In the old testament, Ezekiel and Hose referred to Israel as an ungrateful bride, St Paul metaphorized the Church as Bride and Christ as Bridegroom, and the eleventh century Bernard of Clairvaux made use of allegorical erotic language.

30 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 85.

symbolizes her acceptance into the divine circle, a new family of the spiritual elite. Following this dream, the subsequent visions of Christ that she received assumes a sexual undertone, seeing herself as the bride and Christ as the beloved. In *The Flowing Light*, she wrote:

I hear a voice (says the youth)  
Which speaks somewhat of love.  
Many days have I wooed her  
But never heard her voice.  
Now I am moved  
I must go to meet her,  
She it is who bears grief and love together,  
In the morning, in the dew is the intimate rapture  
Which first penetrates the soul.<sup>31</sup>

In this poem, Christ assumes the likeness of a handsome youth seeking the pleasure of a woman (Mechthild); and in an attempt to indulge Christ, she dresses in a white robe and goes into the woods to wait for her lover. The beloved (Christ) upon arriving asks her to dance with him, after which he invites her into the riverbank saying:

For thou art weary! Come at midday  
To the shade by the brook  
To the resting place of love.<sup>32</sup>

At the resting place where she meets with Christ, she undresses and embraces Christ's delight. Mechthild finally consummates with her Lord as related in one of her poetries:

Now comes a blessed stillness  
Welcome to both, He gives himself to her  
And she to Him .....

When two lovers come secretly together  
They must often part, without parting.<sup>33</sup>

From the above lines, it is clear that Mechthild's methods of divine union and relationship with Christ were related through erotic language and sexual imagery in what may seem an inappropriate employment of anthropomorphic expressions of the divine. It is the view of Mechthild that the body of a female mystic is the perfect vessel for divine inspiration, which enables her (women mystics) to act and talk in a manner that is divinely ordained. This understanding factored into Mechthild's claim that Christ inspired the authorship of *The Flowing Light*, implying that her work is a source of divine revelation. Now, according to Frances Beer, Mechthild's approach may have been motivated, to some extent, by the erotic poetries of the German *minnesingers*. Some of the lines or at least

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31 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 94.

32 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 94.

33 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 95.

similar ideas of the *minnisingers* found entry into Mechthild's poetry, which further raises suspicion about Mechthild's divine authorship.<sup>34</sup>

Mechthild was not alone in her erotic approach of divine union; many others among her contemporaries employed a similar approach, the most famous among them being Beatrice of Nazareth and Hadewijch of Antwerp. Although the writings of Beatrice and Hadewijch may be subjected to allegorical interpretations, Mechthild's theo-eroticism reflects her personal and intentional sexual desires of the divine. The erotic nature of her work was a source of considerable provocation for the members of the clergy, which explains why she took refuge in Helfa in fear of persecution.

## POINT OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE

Having examined the concept of love as represented in the works and teachings of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, a Muslim, and Mechthild of Magdeburg, a Christian, the main purpose of this study is to attempt a structural comparison between the mystical stand of both medieval women mystics; and to deduce the points of convergences and divergences in their works. Given that mystical concepts and ideologies now appeal to modern-contemporary scholars of interfaith relations as a viable field of exploration, a comparative analysis of the mystical stands of Rābi'a and Mechthild will not only add to the existing literature in the field but also create an additional avenue where Christians and Muslims can potentially find common ground for a peaceful relationship.

With regards to the concept of love as represented in their works, the areas where both women mystics converge are multifaceted, and the similarities that characterize their work in terms of life experiences, mystical developments, and teachings are easily deducible. The dominant motive that runs through the entire thesis of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya, as well as of Mechthild of Magdeburg, is the imperative of an incorruptible and undiluted love of God. This motion is scattered across the entirety of *The Flowing Light* as well as the anecdotes or stories relayed about the mystical teachings of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya. In an attempt to annihilate themselves in divine love, Rābi'a lived most of her adult life in seclusion and she would often retreat into the forest to pray and embrace God's presence in the most silent of places. Her match in the 8th century medieval history of women mysticism was non-existent, surpassing them in the seclusion of holiness, and more so in the complete devotion and pure unconditional love of the Ultimate Reality. The same is true of Mechthild of Magdeburg who although born in an aristocratic family renounced her birth privileges to join the beguinage for the sake of God. Mechthild's love of God is even more convincing when compared to Rābi'a, for while it may be argued that Rābi'a's poor background played a role in her unconditional love of God, Mechthild was devoted to Christ even in the face of numerous material resources.

From the unconditional love of God comes the complete renunciation of worldly desires. As it is a defining element among all mystical figures and the study of mysticism itself, the emphasis on the renunciation of the material world was a common feature in the

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34 Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 96.

mystical teachings of Rābī'a and Mechthild. In Rābī'a's philosophical mysticism, the ascetic approach to Sufism dominated her teachings as she developed a love of God that was neither motivated by worldly material nor fear of an unpleasant event; for the worship of only God was enough for her to the exclusion of all others. The same can be said about Mechthild of Magdeburg who also deserted her family's wealth to live a life of destitution. It was as a result of this that both women refused to get married which according to them was a source of distraction on the path of divine love.

The only area where there is a fundamental divergence of opinion in the mystical stand of both women is concerning the intensity of their approach. While Rābī'a's understanding of selfless love of God was, to some extent, excessive in light of the Islamic juridical tradition—in terms of developing an ontology that fails to recognize the material importance of existence and an eschatology that rejects the idea of reward and punishment (*wa'd* and *wa'id*)—she was still within the tolerable bounds of approaching the divine in Islam. The use of erotic language and imagery as apparent in the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg was non-existent in Rābī'a's teachings, and the un-allegorical interpretation that Mechthild's work attracts was also a source of great provocation in Christianity. Had Rābī'a employed the same approach in her description of the divine, she would not only be overstepping the boundary of God–Human relationship in Islam but would be subjecting the divine to anthropomorphic terms, which is strongly abhorred in Islam. Therefore, although both mystics appealed to an idea of love as a path to divine union, the issue of eroticism and anthropomorphism are two fundamental areas where both women diverge.

The case of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) is a very sensitive issue especially in Islam, one that sets both religions—Christianity and Islam—apart. The nature of God as transcending all imaginable knowledge and ineffable to all human sensitivity is a theory that is strongly upheld in Islam. However, while He (God) stands unique in His essence, He at the same time uses attributes that are essentially human-related such as having eyes, hands, ears, face, and sitting (on His throne). However, irrespective of the very few who subscribe to a literalist interpretation of these attributes, the Mutazilite adopts a complete renunciation of anthropomorphism tendencies, whereas the Asharite and Maturudite embrace the middle way—the formula of *bi-lā kayfa* (without asking how). Alternatively, the Quranic references to God's physical attributes are understood metaphorically in the case of the Mutazilite, and figuratively (with clear proof) in the case of the Asharite and Matrudite. Sufi literature also employs similar metaphorical and allegorical language in their remembrance (*zikr*) of the divine. In sharp contrast to Christianity where the nature of God takes on a more anthropomorphic nature in the likeness of the crucified Jesus, this informs why both mystics diverge in their love relationship with the Ultimate.

Deriving insight from the philosophical work of Toshihiko Izutsu in comparative mysticism *Sufism and Taoism*, which attempts to structurally compare between the worldview of Sufism as presented in the *Fusus al-Hikam* (The Bezels of Wisdom)<sup>35</sup> of

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35 See Muhyi ad-Din Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York, N.Y.; Ramsey; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980).

Ibn Arabī and Lao-Tzu's metaphysics of Tao, this study follows the same course of reasoning. The several translations of the works and teachings of both women have been an invaluable contribution to the field of comparative mysticism; and although issues of interpretation and terminological difficulties are still a source of concern when comparing between two or more religious traditions, it is safe to conclude that mysticism could serve as a common avenue with the potential of ending an age-old rivalry that characterizes Christian–Muslim relationships. An emphasis on the selfless love of God as represented in the teachings of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya and Mechthild of Magdeburg also serve as a common core, a magnetic force that attracts adherents of both religions to a common ground, and through spirituality unifies them in the face of diversity.

In summary, Rābi'a and Mechthild both developed an unconditional love of God to the exclusion of all others, and they not only stand unique in their respective age but perhaps in the entire history of their religion. As they both projected the concept of divine love, however, from a different perspective, they serve as models for aspiring mystics and essential figures in the comparative study of mysticism.

## CONCLUSION

Love is a universal phenomenon; while it defies the idea of a scalar system, it also extends the bounds and scopes of religion. Unlike any other phenomenon, it transcends the realm of form and matter into the realm of eternity, enabling the possibility of a close relationship between the divine and the human being. Although love is an expression that features in all religions, the lover establishes a direct connection with God (the Beloved) that cannot be placed within the context of any religious creed or doctrine. As the concept of love is a significant characteristic of mysticism in the Christian and Islamic mystical traditions, so does love exist among adherents of other religions as well as atheists. Irrespective of the differences in approach, the fundamental idea of love remains unchangeable, an unconditional love of God to the exclusion of all others. Not until human beings develop an undiluted love of God, thus following His laws, their understating of God and the world as a whole will forever remain obscure.

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