

Religious Language and the Charge of Blasphemy: In Defence of Al-Hallaj

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Abstract

On the 24th of March 922CE, a Muslim mystic was executed in Baghdad for the alleged crime of blasphemy. Husayn Al-Mansur better known by the nickname Al-Hallāj had his hands and feet struck off and hanged on a gibbet in the full glare of the public. He was also decapitated and his body burnt and his ashes thrown into a river. This ended the earthly career of a famous Muslim mystic. His crime was that he had uttered the words. “Anal Haqq”, (I am the truth). Al-Haqq (the truth) is one of the names or rather attributes of Allah. To have said that he is the truth meant that he was Allah. This paper revisits this Hallājian statement in the light of modern theories of language and conceptions of religious language. This paper posits that Al-Hallāj meant that his “I” is God and not that he is God. The crux of this paper’s argument is that God is not a known object, but a transcendent reality beyond our apprehension. Religious language is borrowed language. We borrow literal language and change it into metaphors of God. We may not move the other way and translate religious metaphors into literal propositions, which is what the religious authorities in Baghdad did in the case of Al-Hallāj. The paper therefore concludes that there was a travesty of justice in the case of Al-Hallāj since he spoke metaphorically and not literally.

Key Words: Al-Hallāj, Blasphemy, Religious Language, Anal-Haqq

Introduction

The Chambers Encyclopaedic Dictionary (1994) defines language as “the system of human communication, both spoken and written, using words in combinations according to established principles” (p. 715). Language is also “studied as a general capacity, not as an aggregate of individual languages” (Hartley, 2002: 130). Language is also the “relations between thoughts, words and external objects.” (Hartley, p.130). Religion has many definitions, but to clarify the subject matter of this paper, I shall define religion as an organised set of beliefs, values and worldviews that connect adherents to a power other than themselves, which often is an object of worship or veneration. Religious language is therefore the use of language (words) to express beliefs, values and worldviews that relate to an object of worship or veneration. Blasphemy is defined as “speaking about God or sacred matters in a disrespectful or profane way” (Chambers, p.140).

Blasphemy also involves attributing to the object of veneration, things that are unworthy. It is also blasphemous for an adherent to arrogate to himself or herself, attributes that are considered the exclusive preserve of the object of veneration. To Rudolf Otto (1950) religion is a “feeling or consciousness of the presence of the wholly other” (p. 27). Thus the object of veneration is completely “other” than ourselves. It is “the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy” (Isaiah 57:15). Because the object of veneration is holy, (totally different) we cannot attribute to it, things that are unholy. For religious people therefore, there is a certain mental division of the cosmos into sacred (holy) and profane (secular). Where an object of veneration inhabits is sacred space. All other space is profane space. Because of the otherness of an object of veneration, we cannot or are not supposed to talk about it in the same way that we talk about ourselves.

But language is literal language. We borrow literal language and turn it into metaphors of our object of veneration. This poses a challenge for the religious use of language. As King (1974) postulates, the fact that we use terms borrowed from other contexts to speak of God is a great “source of confusion” (p. 77). One such confusion is the subject of this paper. On September 1, 913CE, a popular Muslim mystic by the name of Husayn Al-Mansur (857-922) also known as Al-Hallāj, was arrested in Baghdad and imprisoned for nine years and eventually killed on March 24 922CE. His crime was blasphemy. He spoke about himself in ways that are unbecoming of a worshipper. He attributed to himself qualities that are the preserve of the object of worship, in this case, Allah. There are at least three different versions of how the religious authorities came to know about his statement for which he was charged for blasphemy: “Anal Haqq” (I am the truth). One account has it that he went to visit a senior mystic by name Junayd Baghdadi.

When he knocked on Junayd’s door, Junayd asked who was there and Hallāj answered, “I am the Truth.” Junayd is reported to have said to him, “do not say ‘I am the Truth.’” Say, “I come on behalf of the Truth” (Massignon, 1994: 65). Another version has it that he met Junayd on the streets of Baghdad and said to him “I am the Truth.” Junayd is reported to have said to him, “it is by means of the Truth that you are.” Both accounts add that Junayd added, “what gibbet will you stain with your blood”? (Massignon, p.65). Yet a third account has it that he used to go into trances, sometimes on the streets and will utter the statement “Anal Haqq” (Glasse, 1989: 166). He is also accused of other equally blasphemous statements like “God is in heaven, but he is also on earth,” “God is in my turban” and “God is in my blood” (Glasse, p.164). When Junayd reminded him that his blood could be shed on a gibbet as atonement for his blasphemy, he said to Junayd, “if you do not know God, recognise Him in His sign; I am His sign and I am the truth and I have never stopped being true to Truth. And even if I am killed or hung on the gibbet or have my hands and feet cut off, I will not retract” (Massignon, p.67).

At his indictment he was accused of other crimes, other than blasphemy. He was accused of being a Qarmatian (a revolutionary Shia sect that opposed the authority of the Abbasid caliph), a Zindiq (heretic or atheist) and of stealing the secrets of divine power. Putting all his crimes together, he was said to have waged war against Allah and His messenger Muhammad, a crime whose punishment is stipulated in the Qur’an. The reward of those who wage war against Allah and His messenger and strive to create disorder in the land is only this, that they be slain or crucified or their hands and feet cut off on alternate sides, or they be expelled from the land. That shall be a disgrace for them in this world and in the Hereafter they shall have a great punishment (Q: 5: 33). So on March 24, 922CE, his hands and feet were struck off and he was hoisted on a gibbet in the full view of the public. Finally, “the hapless amputee was decapitated and his trunk thrown onto a fire; the ashes that remained when the flames died down were cast into the river; the dead man’s head was displayed for two days on a bridge that spanned the Tigris” (Ryan, 1984: 19). This ended the earthly career of Husayn Al-Mansur Al-Hallaj.

1. *Sufism*

Husayn Al-Mansur Al-Hallaj was a Sufi (mystic) and the statements that he uttered that led to his death were borne out of his mystic experiences. Mysticism connotes something mysterious, not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual effort. In general however, Sufism can be said to be the desire of the human spirit for personal communion with God. This communion comes about when one frees himself from the attachments of this world (zuhd). To the Sufi therefore, love for anything else other than God is vain. Divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing, even of enjoying all the pains and afflictions that God showers upon him in order to test him and to purify his soul. It is this love that carries the mystic to the divine presence (Schimmel: 1975). The practical teaching of Sufism is that of a spiritual path where the wayfarer (salik) who desires to attain communion with God is told where to set off, the ordered stations that he must traverse, the states and conditions he must undergo at these stations and the events that will befall him. These stations must be passed through under the guidance and supervision of a perfect and mature example of humanity, who himself has already traversed the path. If there is no such guidance, the murid (aspirant) is in danger of going astray. This is because the path (tariqa) is narrow and difficult to traverse. There is an age-old Sufi saying that “he who has no Shaykh will have the devil as his Shaykh.” The murid then is supposed to tread this path until he reaches a stage where he sees nothing but God. Some of the maqamat (stations) on the path (tariqa) towards God are; Tawbat (Repentance), Zuhd (Abstinence), Tawakkul (Total trust in God), Faqr (Poverty), Sabr (Patience), Shukr (Gratitude) and love and annihilation (Fana). (Schimmel, pp.109-130).

The maqamat are therefore stations that the murid attains through his/her own moral, religious and ascetic practices. He is therefore inclined to complete all the requirements of one station before leaving it (Schimmel, p.100). In the development of Sufism and especially after the destruction of the caliphate in 1258 and the decline in the identity of the ummah, there emerged the notion of tariqa as an order or brotherhood. Tariqa served as an alternative universal order more effective in promoting brotherhood than the caliphate. In these orders, groups of ascetics met to recite the Qur'an and other religious literature and these recitations gradually took on a liturgical character (zikr). Sufism is of two varieties, each claiming a different type of intimate union between God and the devotee. These two types are called wahdat al-wujud and wahdat al-shuhud, respectively formulated and defended at length in the writings of Ibn Arabi and Ahmad Sirhindi (Ansari, 1986: 114). Wahdat al-wujud perceives the world as a manifestation of God, asserting that God is the absolute, besides whom everything else is non-being. Thus the murid when he reaches the highest station unites himself totally with God.

This union according to Schimmel "may be symbolized as the boundless ocean in which the individual self vanishes like a drop" (Schimmel, p.5). Wahdat al-wujud is the Sufism of Al-Hallāj. Al-Hallāj believed that he had attained fana (union with God). There is a hadith qudsi (saying of the Prophet which is by divine inspiration) in which Abu Huraira reports the Prophet Muhammad as saying; ...and My slave keeps on coming closer to Me through performing nawafil (praying or doing extra deeds besides what is obligatory) till I love him, so I become his sense of hearing with which he hears, and his sense of sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he grips, and his leg with which he walks... (Bukhari Vol 8: 336-337). Wahdat al-shuhud on the other hand postulates that God is transcendent, over, above and beyond this world, the one with whom alone the murid seeks an infinite relationship that does not compromise the distinct identities of the murid and God.

2. *Tawhid (Divine Unity)*

Islam is hinged on a doctrine of absolute and uncompromising monotheism (Tawhid). The Qur'an states; "Say: He is Allah, the One. Allah the eternal, absolute. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none like unto him" (Q: 112). In another verse, it states, "Allah: there is no god but He, the living, the self-subsisting. Neither sleep nor slumber seizes Him. To Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth...He is the high and the great (Q: 2: 255). It is for this reason that Islam takes issue with the Christian concept of trinity. The Qur'an asserts that "the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is" (Q: 3:59). Deification of any human being is therefore considered shirk (associationism) in Islam and every sin is forgivable except the sin of shirk. "Surely Allah will not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, but He will forgive whatever is short of that to whomever He pleases. And whoever associates anything with Allah, has indeed devised indeed a great sin" (Q: 4:48).

To this end, it is said that on the Day of Judgment, Allah will say to Jesus: "Did you say unto mankind: take me and my mother for gods beside Allah? Jesus will say: Be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I said that, you would have known it. You know what is in my mind, and I know not what is in your mind..." (Q: 5: 116). Al-Hallāj was therefore accused of shirk. He was accused of asking his followers to take him as God. The religious authorities in Baghdad are said to have gotten a woman (a friend of Al-Hallāj's daughter) to testify that he (Al-Hallāj) had asked to be worshipped. According to the woman, Al-Hallāj's daughter told her, "worship him" (Al-Hallāj). She then asked Al-Hallāj's daughter, "can one worship anyone but God"? At this point she says that Al-Hallāj, who was close by, heard her and said "yes indeed. There is a God in Heaven and a God on earth" (Massignon, p.246). There are serious problems with the whole trial process of Al-Hallāj, including how evidence was manufactured to find him guilty and this episode is one of them. In the estimation of the religious authorities, if saying "Anal Haqq" did not suffice to get Al-Hallāj charged for blasphemy, asking explicitly to be worshipped did.

3. *Review of Related Literature*

Massignon (1994) discusses the life of Al-Hallāj. Indeed Massignon spent the better part of his life, writing his treatise on Al-Hallāj. He discusses the minute details of Al-Hallāj's life, from his birth to death. Massignon's work seeks to expose all the other factors that must have caused the religious authorities in Baghdad to put Al-Hallāj to death.

Massignon's conclusion is that the statement "Anal Haqq" was not the only reason for which Al-Hallāj was put to death. In fact his thesis is that it may not have been the reason at all. Rather it was a perfect pretext to get rid of an alleged heretic whose popularity was growing with the masses and which was a cause of concern for the religious authorities. At that time, the economic situation in most of the Abbasid caliphate was not a good one and there were constant uprisings against the theocratic government. It was therefore not in the interest of the government that Al-Hallāj's popularity was growing with the masses. Any point of mass mobilisation, other than that of the government had to be crushed. Massignon does not discuss the details of the statement "Anal Haqq" in terms of linguistic meaning and whether it indeed constitutes a blasphemous statement, which is what this paper seeks to do. This paper focuses only on a linguistic analysis of the Hallājian statement. Patrick J. Ryan (1984) in his article "The Earthly Career of Al-Hallāj" as the title suggests, merely summarises the life of Al-Hallāj, including that of Massignon. He devotes some of his article to discussing the relationship between creature and created and the fact that Al-Hallāj's brand of Sufism is as real as any experience of God. Again, Ryan was not concerned with a linguistic analysis of the famous Hallājian statement, which is what this paper is about,

4. Anal Haqq: A Linguistic Analysis

Language or rather words are the tools available to us for describing and talking about phenomenon. All language is literal. So disciplines borrow or appropriate literal language for their use. And when a word changes discipline, its meaning also changes. An example is the word "elastic." The word "elastic" means differently to a tailor, an economist and a physicist. When we say that a dog is good for example, we do not mean that a dog makes ethical decisions regarding the rightness and wrongness of its conduct. Thus, there is a sense in which the "goodness" of a dog is different from the "goodness" of a man. This paper posits that the religious authorities in Baghdad understood or indeed chose to understand Al-Hallāj's statement literally, not religiously. And as King (1974) has stated, using literal language to talk about God is a source of confusion. It is a source of confusion because God is transcendent (wholly other) and language is the language of immanence. Aristotle developed a theory of language called analogy, which allows us to use the same set of words to talk about completely unrelated phenomena. This analogical use of language was perfected by Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas distinguishes three different uses of language: univocal, equivocal and analogical (Hick, 1990). When we say a dog is good, we do not use "goodness" univocally (in the same sense as human goodness) nor do we use it equivocally (with completely different meanings). Rather we use it analogically, which means that at the level of a dog's consciousness, "there is a quality that corresponds to what at the human level we call goodness" (Hick, p.84). So there is a sense in which a dog shares the human quality of goodness. To that extent therefore, we can talk about the goodness of a dog. The same analogical principle applies in the case of Al-Hallāj. There is a sense in which we share in the quality of truthfulness with God. God is the exalted father: he is the magnified form of our human qualities. Therefore when Al-Hallāj said that he is the truth, he meant that he is an embodiment of truth, not that he is God. He meant that at the human level, there is a certain consciousness that approximates to God's truthfulness, of which he shares a part if he wishes to be truly human. When somebody says, "Tyson is a lion," we do not understand it to mean that Tyson has become an animal called lion.

We understand it to mean that Tyson is a ferocious fighter. This is called metaphor. A metaphor is "a rhetorical term when one thing stands for another...humans make sense of the world, of themselves and of their interactions by extending to unknown or new phenomena the characteristics of known ones, thus capturing new experience in terms of something already known" (Hartley, p.143). It is in the same vein that we should understand Al-Hallāj's statement: "Anal Haqq." Al-Hallāj meant that he speaks nothing but the truth; the truth of God. It is a metaphorical statement. Metaphorical statements are not statements of fact and therefore are not to be understood literally. Another sense in which we can explain Al-Hallāj's statement is in relation to Paul Tillich's assertion that religious language is essentially of a symbolic nature. Tillich asserts that a symbol "participates in that to which it points" (Tillich, 1957:42). Using the example of the flag of a nation, Tillich states that a flag participates in the power and dignity of the nation that it represents. So, when we salute the Ghana flag for example, we are not paying respect to the flag per se, but rather, we pay respect to the nation Ghana and the flag is its symbol. We are made in the image of God, according to the Bible. According to the Qur'an we are deputies of God (Q: 2:30). Whether as images or deputies, we are symbols of God.

As symbols of God, we participate in the power of that which we represent including participating in his attributes, except for his omnipotence and omnipresence. Al-Hallāj was therefore asserting the obvious: that he is a participant in God's attribute of truthfulness. I am sure if the Caliph Muqtadir was alive today, he will cringe when he hears people refer to judges as "my lord." For he will say that we have taken judges as gods besides Allah, because Allah is "Hakam" (judge). Referring to a human judge as "my lord" qualifies for the charge of blasphemy going by the standards by which Al-Hallāj was judged. But by addressing human judges as "lord" we mean to say that they are participants in God's attribute of justice, which qualifies them to administer justice at the human level.

5. Anal Haqq: A Context Analysis

The contexts within which words are used are important for understanding those words. Grundy (2000) states that "it is not so much what the sentences literally mean that matters when we talk as how they reveal the intentions and strategies of the speakers themselves" (p.3). When a father asks her daughter who comes home from school with her lunch pack intact: "why did you not eat the food"? and she answers, "Daddy it is the taste," we immediately understand it to mean that the food did not taste good. On the other hand, if a beverages company runs a piece of advertisement and ends it with "it is the taste" we understand them to be telling us that their beverages taste good. In these two examples, the same sets of words have been used in different contexts, which have evoked different meanings. It is no different with words spoken in a religious context. Indeed because religion and God belong to a transcendent reality, words spoken in religious contexts or God-talk cannot be interpreted in a secular context. Randall (1958) argues that religious language is non-cognitive. Cognitive language is that which can either be verified or falsified. But religious language is not meant to be verified or falsified and hence it is non-cognitive.

When religious people utter such words as, "God is just" or "God loves humankind," they do not intend these words to be understood cognitively. Therefore Al-Hallāj did not intend his words, "I am the Truth" (Anal Haqq) to be understood cognitively and hence it was wrong for the religious authorities in Baghdad to understand them cognitively. According to Randall (1958) religious words have a four-fold function: they arouse the emotions and stir people to action; they may thereby strengthen people's practical commitment to what they believe to be right. They stimulate co-operative action and thus bind a community together through a common response to its symbols. They are able to communicate qualities of experience that cannot be expressed by the literal use of language. They both evoke and serve to foster and clarify our human experience of an aspect of the world that can be called divine. In this sense, Al-Hallāj was simply speaking in a way that was meant to strengthen his practical commitment to what he believed to be right: that we speak the truth always. That it is important to be conscious of the Truth (God) always. Massignon (1994) states that by "Anal Haqq" Al-Hallāj meant that his "I" is God and not that he is God, even though Massignon did not give a basis for his assertion. Today we can demonstrate Massignon's thesis more practically.

According to the French Philosopher Ricoeur (1995), every "I" is a narrative. Ricoeur (1995) argues that when we are confronted with the question "Who am I"? we typically tell a story, emphasising certain aspects that we deem to be of special significance, to be that which constitutes the leitmotif in our life, to be that which defines who we are, that which we present to others for recognition and approval. To answer the question "who I am" therefore is to tell the story of a life. When confronted with the question of who one is, one is forced to reflect on and evaluate one's way of living, the values that one honours and the goals that one pursues. One is forced to confront the life one is living. In analysing the self, Mead (1934) postulated that humans have the distinctive ability to be both the subjects and the objects of their experience. He called this the "I" and the "Me." According to Mead (1934) the "I" is impulsive, creative, spontaneous and generally unburdened by social rules and restrictions. The "I" is therefore the source of creative genius and individuality, while the "Me" is the socially conscious part of the self. An identity narrative must therefore necessarily entail a reference to others. On the day Junayd asked when he heard the knock on his door "who is there"? it necessitated Al-Hallāj to confront immediately, who he was. In confronting that question, he had to present a narrative of himself that reflected his life career as a mystic (one who is constantly on a tariqa or path of God).

God-consciousness is the centre of his world and since we cannot define ourselves in isolation, he had to come up with an answer that reflected an identity of himself which he believed will give him approval in the eyes of Junayd, who himself was a mystic. I doubt that there could be a better answer than “Anal Haqq.”

6. *Anal Haqq: An Islamic Appraisal*

“Call on Allah or call upon Rahman; by whichever name you call Him, His are the most beautiful names...all praise belongs to Allah who has taken unto Himself no son, and who has no partner in His kingdom, nor has He anyone to help Him on account of weakness...” (Q: 17: 111-112). To Allah belong the most beautiful names. Some of these include Al-Malik (The King), Al-Quddus (The Holy), Al-Hamid (The Praised) and Al-Aziz (The Mighty). According to purist interpretations of Islam, these names are exclusively God’s. And since God’s names are hallowed, we cannot encroach on them in an unqualified manner. But is that really the case that only God can be referred to as Aziz and Hamid? In Islam, actions are judged according to intentions. Umar bin Al-Khattab said: I heard Allah’s Apostle saying, ‘the reward of deeds depends upon the intentions and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended...’ (Bukhari, Vol 1:1). That is why in Islam, we attain salvation not necessarily by doing acts, but by recognising that we ought to do them. So a Muslim who does not fast in the month of Ramadan is still a Muslim once s/he recognises that it is something s/he ought to do.

So when I say “I am Hamid,” I mean I am the son of Hamidu the retired soldier. This is the identity that I seek to convey and my intention is clear. How anybody can stretch that to imply that I am playing God is unfathomable. An analogy can be made with the case of Adam, when Allah asked the angels to prostrate (sujud) before him. In Islam prostration is for Allah only. That is why the mosque is called masjid (from prostration) rather than musallah (place of prayer). If so, why did Allah ask the angels to prostrate before Adam? Was Allah suggesting that Adam is co-God with Him? Certainly not! God asked the angels to prostrate before Adam to show respect for the knowledge that Adam had which they did not have. This article asserts that clearly, Al-Hallāj did not intend to play God as evidenced from his writings and pronouncements. On the contrary, he is a firm believer in Tawhid (Divine unity) and to the extent that intentions matter, Al-Hallāj should not have been judged solely on the basis of his statement. The charge of blasphemy against Al-Hallaj has no canonical basis in Islamic law. On the contrary, Al-Hallāj had a Qur’anic basis for his pronouncement. Talking about His Messenger Muhammad Allah says, “Surely a Messenger has come unto you from among yourselves; it grieves him that you should fall into trouble; he is ardently desirous of your welfare; and to the believers he is Rauf (Compassionate), Rahim (merciful)” (Q:9:127).

In this verse Allah Himself addresses Muhammad as Rauf, Rahim. Even though Allah did not prefix these attributes with the definite article “the,” they are his attributes nonetheless. Did Allah imply that Muhammad is co-God with him? Allah clearly is not oblivious of the fact that at the human level, there is a quality that we possess, which approximates to his qualities of compassion and mercy. The Qur’an states that Allah has created everything (including human beings) in truth (Bil Haqq) (Q: 10:5). Elsewhere He states: “Woe to those who reject truth!” (Q: 77:49). To acknowledge God’s creation is to accept the truth (for they are created in truth) and to not acknowledge God’s creation is to reject truth. So Al-Hallaj was engaging in self affirmation when he said “Anal Haqq.” He was acknowledging his creation by the Truth in truth. It is the position of this paper that it is only when one has said that “I am Allah,” (Anal Allah) can one be accused of blasphemy. Allah is the only name that cannot be shared by any other creature. To underline the divine unity of Allah, the word (Allah) has no plural. Minor deities (gods) in Arabic are āliha and a god is illah. On the other hand the other attributes may be pluralised. For example, “Haqq” can be rendered into plural forms like “haqa’iq” and “huquq.” To the extent that “Haqq” has plural forms, it means that there are gradations of it and Al-Hallāj meant to say that he shares in some of the grades of truth.

7. *Al-Hallaj Speaks*

The religious authorities in Baghdad took Al-Hallāj’s statement (“Anal Haqq”) in isolation and charged him for blasphemy. This was not only selective justice, but manifestly unfair. It is important that we take a glimpse at Al-Hallāj’s entire philosophy of God. Al-Hallāj was also a profuse writer of mystical poetry.

His most popular collection of poetry that survives to this day is the *Tawasin*, which he sub-titled, *A Mystical Treatise on Knowing God and Invitation to the Dance*. Al-Hallāj was executed on two principles: that “*Anal Haqq*” was a reference to himself as God and that it was a violation of the creed of divine unity (*Tawhid*) in Islam. So I shall reproduce excerpts from his *Tawasin* on truth and *Tawhid*.

7.1. On Truth (Haqq)

Allah did not speak to any thing Except this inner reckoning
And asked nothing from you and me Except that we
should know His way And follow after in His truth
To lead us past the gate of death Reject your inner artifacts
That you may hear God as he speaks Let He be you, in reality
I-ness the subject, you the predicate The object
defined, becoming subject The author of the meaning is
The Truth of Allah’s utterance Neither teller nor Truth is
in The method of His creation This nearing Truth is only found
In vigorous exactitude Truth and the Truth of
Truths is there In the distinctions ever finer
The truths (*haqa’iq*) are his glory Selves are his portico

7.2. On Divine Unity (Tawhid)

He is Allah the Living Allah is One, Unique, Not-othering
Alone and testified to be One Not more, nor less, in
our conception Both are One, Allah and the name
And in Him also the Unity of the One From Him comes the
distance That separates others from His presence
We see the figures kneeling to pray Each of them lit by Allah’s
ray Casting a dark shadow behind A reflection of Allah’s
One mind The knowledge of *Tawhid* In an autonomous
idea Out of many and several ideas It may be represented thus
The *Tawhid* is an attribute Of the many created
subjects.

From the verses above, it clear that Al-Hallaj was a believer in the divine unity of God. Essentially he was a Sufi. Al-Ghazzali, arguably, the most respected Muslim scholar of all time had this to say about Sufism; “I saw clearly that the mystics were men of personal experience not of words” (Watt, 2002: 135). Al-Ghazzali therefore advised circumspection in discussing mystical perceptions, because they have the tendency to cause a scandal, which is what Al-Hallaj caused with his open expression of his mystical experience. Sufism is secrecy. That is why their prayers are called *sihr* (secret). This reality must have dawned on Al-Hallāj rather too late. At the gibbet, he cried out to his lord saying “See these people; your worshippers. They have assembled to kill me, out of zeal for you in order to draw near to you...forgive them. If you had revealed to them what you have revealed to me, they will not do what they are doing; and if you had concealed from me what you have concealed from them, I would not be able to undergo the ordeal that I am enduring. Praise be to you in whatsoever you do, praise be to you whatsoever you will” (Massignon, p.285).

Conclusion

“And if your lord had willed, he would surely have made you (mankind) one people...” (Q: 11:117). There is also a popular saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that “differences of opinion in my ummah are a blessing.” The religious authorities of Baghdad had a theistic understanding of God while Al-Hallāj had a pantheistic understanding of Him. To this end, the Qur’an asserts, “Let there be no compulsion in religion...” (Q: 2:256). If we differ in our religious views, the Qur’an encourages us to say to one another “to you be your religion and to me mine” (Q: 109:6). Unfortunately, the religious authorities in Baghdad did not heed this Qur’anic counsel. They summoned Al-Hallaj for expressing his understanding of Islam and Allah and urged him to retract. Convinced of his religious experience, Al-Hallāj refused and suffered the penalty for it. In this paper I have tried to show that Al-Hallāj’s religious experience and understanding was as valid as that of the religious authorities in Baghdad. The benefit of modern theories of language, have helped us to situate Al-Hallāj’s mystic and religious experiences in the context of God-talk. By what today we understand to be the analogical, contextual and symbolic uses of language, we can assert that far from being blasphemous, Al-Hallāj found the appropriate register for conveying his experience and his worldview. According to the Qur’an only Allah knows who is right and who is wrong. “Verily He who ordained the Qur’an for you, will bring you back to the place of return. Say: ‘My lord knows best who it is that brings true guidance, and who is in manifest error’” (Q: 28:85). The death of Al-Hallāj should serve to teach us that “the light is one but the lamps are many.”

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