

The Enigma of Hallaj

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Herbert W. Mason, *Al-Hallaj* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), 106 pp.

One of the most forbidding images in the history of Islamic spirituality is the public execution of the great Muslim mystic Husayn bin Mansur Hallaj in 922. The punishment followed a long and well-publicized trial in which Hallaj was accused of sorcery and of attempting to overthrow the Islamic Shari'ah. The sentence against Hallaj was singularly harsh. He was publicly flogged five hundred lashes, stoned by believers in the city square, and then raised on a cross where he was left bleeding for the night, his hands and feet having been amputated. The following morning he was beheaded, his trunk doused with fuel and set on fire and his ashes scattered in the Tigris River. His head was displayed in towns and districts as a warning to opponents of the State. Such shocking measures ensured that the execution and the circumstances that precipitated it would remain etched in human memory over the centuries through accounts of biographers, mystics, and historians. Herbert Mason's *Al-Hallaj* is the latest addition to this vibrant trajectory.

A professor of history and religion at Boston University, Mason has been conducting research on Hallaj for the past thirty years, a devotion he might have inherited from his former teacher Louis Massignon, the French scholar who started work on Hallaj's thoughts and ideas in 1907, culminating in four volumes posthumously published in 1975 as *La passion d'al-Hallaj*. Mason translated this monumental work from French into English. His new book, a slim volume on perhaps the most celebrated and reviled mystic of all times, brims with power and insight—perhaps as much for the author's empathy for the “martyr of Love” as an attempt for mediating on the event's inner meaning.

The story of Hallaj, Mason notes, “is one of unhinging human self-assurance and spiritual selflessness. It remains an awesome mystery and guide across the ages for those who would pursue the truth of our

human existence to its deepest and most exacting unfathomable source.” A spiritual celebrity whose disciples ranged from the common to the court, Hallaj aroused the jealousy and wrath of the religiopolitical establishment by his outspoken criticism of injustice and deceit. Hallaj was particularly harsh in his indictment of the self-indulgent, corrupt rulers and their “illicit banking and speculation interests, operating counter to Islamic belief throughout the empire.” Moreover, his popularity won him enemies among the literalist *‘ulama* as well as some Sufis. Many Shi’as also felt uneasy with his social radicalism and public declaration of *ana al-haqq* (I am the Truth)—reflecting a claim of union with God. Such a claim by a charismatic preacher seemed to undermine the religiopolitical basis of Shi’a authority rooted in the notion of the hidden Imam.

However, as Mason points out, far from being viewed as an ecstatic eccentric on the fringe of Islam, many Islamic traditionalists backed Hallaj in his mission “to reanimate ritual observance and share through public preaching his deeper understanding” of the relationship between Man and God. Mason notes that “the key instigators of public demonstrations on his behalf at the end were arch traditionalists—the Hanbalites and Hanbalite educated.” Mason argues that Hallaj’s execution was not so much precipitated by his alleged subversion of Islamic law as by the threat he posed to the interests of the ruling elite. In fact, Hallaj was part of a mystical tradition in Islam where “the mystic’s relationship with the Real, the One Creative Truth (*al-Haqq*), remained the bedrock of action and experience.” For Hallaj, the threshold for such a relationship was a “spiritual anguish” that impelled him “to risk even the forbidden, in order to know and serve Him more fully.” Such an act of transgression might have led Hallaj to discover a quality of God that had remained unknown or unspoken: “that God as Truth and the dwelling place of truth is also the source of irony and paradox, of freedom of thought about such subjects as Satan, and ultimately the way to unveiling the mystery of the statement that God is the Lord of the Worlds (*Rabb al-‘Alamin*)” (p. 61).

Mason gives a synoptic view of these Hallajian ideas by drawing on one of the martyr’s best known works, *Tawasin*, “a subtle monologue” in a style emulated by Dostoevsky in his *Grand Inquisitor*. Here Hallaj deals with the problem of Iblis or Satan from an entirely new angle and argues that in disobeying God, Satan showed himself to be a “pure monotheist”: he affirmed God’s transcendence “by refusing to bow down before His unclean creature, man.” A jealous lover, Satan was “unable to bear God extending to others His knowledge and secret of eternal life.” In professing to love God more purely than humanity, Satan became “the narrowest monotheist.” He could neither tolerate apparent contradictions in human life, nor respect human choice and creativity. For all his devo-

tion, however, Satan “wallowed in mud and embraced damnation” (p. 60).

However, in the year 922, it was Hallaj whose damnation and physical dismemberment the “narrow monotheists” succeeded in enacting. In the centuries that followed many “purists” sentenced him over and over to uphold the judgment of their predecessors. For example, four centuries after the execution, Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328), a Hanbali traditionalist, re-examined the trial to conclude that Hallaj was justly condemned and that “whoever approves of him must be killed like him.” For Mason, however, “there is more than a little Arab ethnocentricity” in Ibn Taymiya’s condemnation of the Persian Hallaj and his universalist monotheism. A Sunni bearing the name of the Prophet’s grandson, Husayn, the archetypal martyr especially revered by the Shi’as, Hallaj’s own martyrdom had a resonance of Jesus whose love and suffering he re-enacted on the cross. In fact, some eleven centuries after his execution and in an era marked by globalization of information, economics, and culture, Hallaj’s influence seems to be actually growing. As Mason notes, through Massignon in the West, Hallaj has been “instrumental in communicating the universal quality of Islamic mysticism to those outside his civilization,” a quality “that continues to enlarge its range of admirers and adherents in our time.”

As for the Muslim world, the transgressive spirituality Hallaj symbolized resurfaced in Iqbal’s philosophy of the Self (Khudi), reconceptualizing the relationship between the human and the Divine, a reconceptualization first brought out from the private realm of inner experience to the public sphere by Hallaj through ecstasy, anguish, and martyrdom. In this sense, reclamation of a Hallajian heritage of free thinking and devotion remains central for resolving the spiritual and intellectual crisis that lies at the heart of Muslim malaise today. Mason’s *Al-Hallaj* forms part of a response to this imperative. It is an excellent primer about a mystic who transcends time and culture. However, poor editing has marred the quality of a moving text, which occasionally reads like an unedited draft.