

The Heart of the Soul

by Dorothy C. Buck

In 858 A.D. the Sufi mystic al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj was born in Persia. In 922 A.D. he was accused of violating Islamic law and, after imprisonment and torture, he was executed for blasphemy. The legend of this mystic/martyr of Islam has been kept alive throughout the Muslim world in ritual and prayer. Persian and Turkish mystical poets have told and re-told his story in diverse literary forms and the poet Rumi used the Hallajian themes. Members of Sufi orders today refer to al-Hallaj as a true disciple of divine love.

In his travels as a mendicant preacher and spiritual master, al-Hallaj tried to lead his followers ever more deeply into the reality of the human soul toward ultimate unity with the divine. His writings passionately described divine love as he sought to lose himself in God (Massignon 1983, 2:198):

You infuse my heart with consciousness
as You infuse bodies with souls.

One of the most compelling themes from al-Hallaj's devotional doctrine is that of the Virgin Heart, which refers to the secret place in the center of the human soul where God alone has access. Al-Hallaj stated (Massignon 1989, 133):

Our hearts are one single Virgin, which the
dream of no dreamer can penetrate ...
which only the presence of the Lord
penetrates in order to be conceived therein.

In 1907 Louis Massignon, a young Frenchman, became interested in the life of al-Hallaj, traveling to Iraq as an archeologist, in pursuit of the Hallajian legend. Al-Hallaj soon became the subject of Massignon's doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne in Paris. Massignon's passionate search for sources on al-Hallaj's life, doctrine, and legend led him on a fifty-year journey of research and writing. Most profound, however, was his own experience of al-Hallaj, which Massignon felt contributed to his own spiritual conversion to Catholicism. Massignon (1883-1962) was a renowned Orientalist of his time. Not only was he a distinguished professor at the prestigious College de France, but he also served as the French cultural ambassador to the Near East. An advocate of Islamic-Christian dialogue, he ultimately became a Catholic priest of the Melkite Rite, even as his life work was focused on the life and teachings of al-Hallaj, the mystic martyr of Islam.

Massignon's conversion experience, from modern secular intellectual to devout seeker of the divine, took place in Baghdad in 1908. The unique nature of his experience was that his call to Christianity took place in the Muslim world and that he was convinced that it happened through the intercession of the tenth century mystic of Islam, al-Hallaj.

Massignon's reflections on al-Hallaj's Virgin Heart, or *le point Vierge*, were incorporated in his major writings, lectures, and extensive correspondence, and became an integral part of his ongoing spiritual

conversion. He conceived of this theme as a connecting link between his growing conviction of the need for interreligious dialogue and understanding and his belief in the need for hospitality, humility, and compassion for all of humanity. Massignon wrote (Massignon 1989, 133):

Introspection must guide us to tear through the concentric "veils" which ensheathe the heart, and hide from us the virginal point, the secret (*sirr*) wherein God manifests himself.

Massignon leads me to reflect deeply on the layers of meaning evoked by this image of the Virgin Heart at the center of the human soul. Here he is suggesting that my heart is "ensheathed," covered over by "veils" of illusions, assumptions, judgments, and attachments that prevent me from even imagining a place for the divine within me. This blindness prevents me from recognizing the same virginal point in the souls of others.

In 1959 the Trappist monk Thomas Merton began a correspondence with Massignon. Both men were seekers of the mystical aspects of diverse religious traditions. Merton was drawn to Massignon's increasing activism as a witness against war, specifically the Algerian-French crisis, and was intrigued by the theme of the Virgin Heart. In a letter to Massignon on July 20, 1960, he wrote (Merton 1994, 278):

Louis, one thing strikes me and moves me most of all. It is the idea of the "*point vierge, ou le désespoir accule le coeur de l'excommunié*" ["the virginal point, the center of the soul, where despair corners

the heart of the outsider"] ... We in our turn have to reach that same '*point vierge*' in a kind of despair at the hypocrisy of our own world.

One day Thomas Merton was standing at the corner of an intersection in the heart of a busy shopping district. He wrote (Merton 1965, 156-57):

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness ... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud ... I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Merton's epiphanous moment reminds me of al-Hallaj, who, in his passion for God, came to see the Divine everywhere and in everyone. In this vision there is a recognition of the Virgin Heart, a momentary joy at knowing what is hidden from most of us by our own despair and inability to open our hearts to others in true hospitality, especially those who are strangers, who practice other religions, or whospeak other languages.

I am afraid to experience the sacred in

others. It would require me to risk being touched by the Spirit, as Massignon was, and to experience my own conversion. My heart would be transformed by the presence of the divine seeking hospitality in the depth of my soul. Yet, despite my fear of changing my habitual way of seeing the world, of making artificial distinctions between people of different nationalities, races, or beliefs, the unexpected visitor awakens me and arouses my desire for communion, for connection, and love itself transforms my vision. Then I must see people “walking around shining like the sun”. Then I can no longer pass by the homeless people as if they did not exist, nor can I make any distinction between those who have wealth, education, or position, and those who do not. I can no longer deny that I too am homeless, a refugee, a victim of social and political injustice. I must speak out with al-Hallaj, Massignon, and Merton, who wrote (Merton 1965, 158):

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God ... this little point ... is the pure glory of God in us ... It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody.

I understand this “point of pure truth” to mean that I must be capable of recognizing the sacred in everyone, as al-Hallaj did. To believe in the mystery of the Virgin Heart is to believe in a secret place in every human soul where the sacred is given to us despite our unworthiness, failures, and human limitations. That place cannot be touched by anything I do,

and yet it calls me to transcend myself, to see all others as they are -- sacred. Only then can I say with Hallaj (Massignon 1983, 426):

My soul is mixed and joined together with your soul and every accident that injures you injures me.

References

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