IS GOD OBLIGED TO ANSWER PRAYERS OF PETITION (*DU'A*)? THE RESPONSE OF CLASSICAL SUFIS AND QUR'ANIC EXEGETES

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ABSTRACT

The following article sets out to explore classical responses within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis and Sufism to the theological problem of how it is that God responds to all prayers of petition. The basis of this problem rests on two Qur'anic verses in which such a guarantee is explicitly made. In Q 2:186, the Qur'an has God declare, "I answer the call [*da'wa*] of the suppliant [*da'i*] when he calls upon Me [*da'ani*]." And in Q 40:60, the Qur'an has God state, "Call upon Me [*ud'uni*], and I will answer." The article presents an overview of the various strategies through which Muslim thinkers sought to resolve the underlying problem. In the process of exploring this question the article also demonstrates, by drawing on a wide range of classical texts, the interdependence of the Islamic subtraditions of Qur'anic commentary and Sufi thought, particularly in the latter's more "practical" dimensions.

He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him. —PSALMS 91:15

To be a religious man and to pray are really one and the same thing. —FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER

At the heart of belief in a personal deity, there lies a conviction in the possibility of a communicative exchange between the divine and the human orders. So central is this exchange to the religious consciousness of the human being that William James went so far as to declare it "the very soul and essence of religion."[1] In Islam, this communicative exchange can be conceived of as comprising two opposing but complementary movements: a "descent" on the part of God, which occurs through either "revelation" (*wahy*) or "inspiration" (*ilham*), and a corresponding "ascent" on the part of

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS CULTURES, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2011

the human being through prayer. In the divine descent, God, it is believed, speaks to the human being; in the human ascent, God is the object of human communication. As far as "revelation" is concerned, it has been typically understood within the Sunni tradition to be an experience that is the exclusive privilege of divine messengers and prophets. "Inspiration," on the other hand, constitutes a lesser form of revelation that any human can experience and which, as the Qur'an makes clear, is also the basis of the soul's knowledge of right and wrong (Q 91:8). The communicative "ascent" on the part of the human being through prayer can itself take on three forms or modes: formal ritual prayer (*salat*),[2] invocation or the remembrance of God (*dhikr*),[3] and finally *du'a* (or less commonly, *da'wa*),[4] a term that is usually translated as "supplicatory" or "petitionary prayer" but which can also be rendered "free prayer" to distinguish it from *salat*, which is marked by a fixed set of motions, postures, and formulas.[5] Of these three forms of prayer, du'a corresponds most closely in its basic meaning to our English term *prayer*, which derives from the Latin *precare*, which means to "beg" and to "entreat."[6] It is through these two inverse movements—a descending one on the part of God and an ascending one on the part of the human being—that a dialectical or what James referred to as a "transactional" relationship is established between the divine and the human orders.[7]

The purpose of this article is to explore responses to a particular problem that presented itself in classical Islamic analyses of supplicatory prayer, namely, whether God is obliged to grant a response to every act of du'a on the part of the human being. The question centered, more specifically, around the apparent paradox presented by the Qur'anic guarantee of such a response. There are two verses in which such a guarantee is explicitly made. In Q 2:186, the Qur'an has God declare, "I answer the call [*da'wa*] of the suppliant [*da'i*] when he calls upon Me [*da'ani*]." And in Q 40:60, the Qur'an has God stating, "Call upon Me [*ud'uni*], and I will answer you." The problem presented by these verses was highlighted in the early authoritative Qur'an commentary of the historian Tabari (d. 923) when he cited an exegetical authority asking, "What is the meaning behind the words of God, when you see many calling [*yad'una*] upon God without receiving a response?"[8] The Asharite theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) would, along similar lines, inquire through the mouth of an imaginary interlocutor, "We see many a supplicant going to great lengths in his supplicatory prayer [*du'a*] and humble petition [*tadarru'*] without receiving a response."[9] The same question would also be raised in the commentary of the Cordoban hadith scholar and jurist

Qurtubi (d. 1273): "What is the case of the suppliant who supplicates without receiving a response?"[10] All three of these commentators were drawing attention—and they were not the only ones to do so—to the undeniable religious experience of unanswered prayers, a theological problem not unique to Muslim thinkers.[11]

Indeed, the basic problem presented by these two verses, which as we shall see below was explored in the Qur'an commentary tradition, also formed part of the broader analyses within the Sufi tradition of the meaning and significance of du'a. Thus this essay shall occasionally draw on the meditations of some of the classical Sufi psychologists to broaden the scope of our inquiry.[12] This shall be done because it is within the Sufi tradition that we find the most sustained and exhaustive meditation on the inner spiritual life of Islam, one that is marked heavily by a concern for prayer in all its modes. The decision to draw from these two genres of Islamic literature in order to explore the central problem addressed in this article is made all the more natural because of the extensive overlap of material found in both the exegetical and Sufi sources. As the following article will show, traditional Qur'anic commentaries and Sufi analyses were closely intertwined domains of religious inquiry when it came to addressing those aspects of revelation that dealt most directly with the inner life. The Sufi authors would often use the traditional commentary material as a springboard for more extensive inquiries of their own, never losing sight of the formal and "exoteric" religious basis of the higher reaches of the Islamic contemplative tradition. The mainstream commentaries of the Qur'an were also not entirely devoid of interpretations that one would typically find in Sufi texts and often liberally cited foundational figures of the Sufi subtradition, particularly in its early, developmental phases.

WHAT IS MEANT BY *DU'A*?

One of the means through which the exegetes sought to navigate around the problem of the promised response in Q 2:186 and 40:60 was to understand du'a within the context of these verses as something distinct from supplication in the restricted sense. Thus Razi notes that according to one view, "by *du'a* is meant repentance from sins. This is because the penitent one calls upon God most High through his repentance."[13] The response that is guaranteed is of God's acceptance of one's sincere repentance. The Mutazilite theologian and grammarian Zamakhshari (d. 1144 C.E.), writing

before Razi, accepted this as a possible interpretation in his own terse commentary on these verses, citing the words of an authority for whom "abandoning sins is *du'a*."[14] According to yet another view, du'a can be understood as any act of praising God through words of adoration, such as, "O God! There is no deity but You!" These "calls" will elicit a response in the form of a reward from heaven.[15]

One of the more commonly found explanations is to understand du'a as *'ibada* (worship). This equation finds confirmation in the hadith, frequently quoted in the commentaries, that "du'a is worship" (*al-du'a huwa al-'ibada*).[16] As Razi and many exegetes observe, this equation is also confirmed on numerous occasions in the Qur'an.[17] The divine response that is guaranteed in this interpretation is to any act of worship to the extent that it involves the human being calling out to and reaching God through it. There are, however, two different ways of conceptualizing du'a-as-*'ibada* in these verses. According to one view, *du'a* refers to all forms of worship, ranging from declarations of divine unity to expressions of devotional piety and obedience (*ta'a*). To such forms of servitude, God will respond with a reward of Paradise and forgiveness. A second view restricts the promised response to the act of worship contained within du'a itself, understood narrowly as supplicatory prayer. In other words, God promises to reward anyone who petitions Him, simply for the act alone, even though He may not grant the request. This is because at the heart of such a petition lies an act of self-surrender. According to both of these views, the "response" (*ijaba*) of God is a "reward" (*thawab*) for obedience and worship, which either resides within du'a or is an expression of du'a.[18]

DU'A AS SUPPLICATORY PRAYER

Even though the aforementioned interpretations appear to resolve the problem presented in the verses, some of the commentators still prefer to understand *du'a* simply as supplicatory prayer, with the divine response directly answering the prayer itself. This is because such an interpretation rests on the most immediate sense conveyed by the verse. *Du'a* after all refers in its principle lexical sense to an act of "solicitation," "request" or "petition" (*talab*), or an expression of a "wish" or "desire" (*raghba*).[19] Such an interpretation, however, naturally leaves open the question of why God does not always seemingly grant supplicatory prayers. In other words, why do prayers so often seem to be met with silence from heaven? One way the

classical thinkers sought to resolve this problem was by stipulating certain conditions that had to be met in order for one's supplicatory prayers to be effective. Thus we read in one of the most widely read works of the famous twelfth-century founder of one of the most widespread Sufi orders of the Islamic world, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani: "*Du'a* has rules of propriety and (certain) conditions (which are proper to it). These are the means through which one elicits a response and obtains the object of his desire. He who observes and fulfils them (the prerequisites) is from the folk of those are who are responded to [*ahl al-ijaba*], while he who is heedless of them, or fails to meet their conditions, is from the folk of those who infringe (the rules of) supplicatory prayer [*ahl al-i'tida fi al-du'a*]."[20] Among the most important of these, as laid out in the Qur'an commentators and works of Sufi psychologists, is to refrain, within one's capacity, from sinful behavior. Qurtubi, echoing many other commentators, states with confidence that the divine response "does not require a response in an absolute sense, for everyone who calls upon God, in all the details [of his petition]."[21] To draw the intended response, one must meet the conditions of du'a, among the most important of which is to refrain from acts of transgression against God. "Call upon your Lord, humbly beseeching [Him] [*tadarru'an*] and silently [*khufyatan*]," Qurtubi quotes from the Qur'an, for "verily God does not love transgressors [*mu'tadin*]" (Q 7:55). If God does not love transgressors, Qurtubi rhetorically asks, how can He be obliged to respond to their petitions? As far as Qurtubi is concerned, Q 7:55 qualifies 2:286 and 40:60 by implicitly stipulating the need to refrain from *i'tida* (transgressions) for the divine promise to hold. "Everyone who persists in a major sin [*kabira*]," writes the exegete, "whether he is knowledgeable or ignorant of it is a transgressor."[22]

The importance attached to refraining from major transgressions is also highlighted in a telling story found in the *Treatise* of Qushayri (d. 1072). A certain ruler once succumbed to a sickness that none of his physicians could cure. In their desperation his advisers summoned the saint and ascetic of Basra, Sahl al-Tustari (d. 899),[23] to pray for him. It was hoped that since the holy man had developed a reputation of being *mustajab al-du'a*, "he whose prayers are answered,"[24] his entreaties to God might serve to heal the wretched ruler. When Sahl arrived, he begged for a prayer, to which the saint tersely replied, "How is it that He will answer my prayer for you, when there are within your prisons those who have been oppressed?" Understanding the import of Sahl's words, and the gravity of his own injustices, which he had perhaps deemed too trivial to be of any real consequence, the

ruler immediately released the prisoners. Sahl then made a prayer that led, according to Qushayri, to the restoration of his health.[25]

The general need to take the injunctions of religion seriously for one's prayers to be effective is perhaps most concisely summarized in the words of the famous eighth-century prince-turned-ascetic of Balkh:

> It was once said to Ibrahim b. Adham, "why is it that we supplicate to God and yet He does not respond to us." He said, "it is because you know God but have not obeyed Him. You know the Prophet but have not followed his way [*sunna*]. You know the Qur'an but have not acted in accordance with it. You have consumed the blessings of God but have not shown gratitude for them. You know Paradise but have not strained to seek it out. You know the Fire but have not fled it. You know Satan but have not waged war against him and have (instead) conformed to his wishes. You know death but have not prepared for it. You have buried the deceased but have not drawn any lessons from them. And you have abandoned (looking at) your own sins and have instead preoccupied yourselves with the sins of others."[26]

Within the wider rubric of religious injunctions that one should take care to uphold, the exegetical and Sufi authorities single out a few the suppliant should be especially mindful of. Among the most important of these is the need to ensure that one's livelihood is pure. After all, a hadith states, "Make your earnings pure, so that your prayers will be answered."[27] This led one of the early sages to declare, "*Du'a* is the key through which needs are met. Its teeth are lawful morsels of food."[28] Sahl al-Tustari considered "lawful food" to be one of the seven conditions of du'a.[29]

One of the most influential of Sufi figures, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), argues that the rules of propriety also require that one repent with complete and total sincerity for one's sins.[30] He mentions an incident from the life of Moses, in which he prayed with the Israelites for rain because of a severe drought that had afflicted their lands. The du'a was ineffective, so he prayed again, also with his people. Again, there was no response. He did this a third time, with the same consequence. This left his community baffled. How could a prayer led by a divine messenger be refused? Divine revelation then came to Moses, informing him that the drought would continue as long as there remained among their midst a backbiter guilty of sowing dissention. Seeing that this mysterious culprit's presence was deterring the acceptance of their desperate prayers, Moses implored God

to reveal his identity, so that they might expel him from their ranks. To this request God replied, "Shall I prohibit you from revealing the faults of others while I do so myself?" The Israelites realized that the only way out lay in repenting as an entire community. They did so and prayed for rain again, after which God rescued them from their plight.[31] Ghazali mentions this story to highlight not only the collective consequences of sin but also the need to engage in a continuous process of self-examination and self-accounting to identify those sins that might, without repentance, serve to impede the granting of one's prayers.

Another condition, though a rather self-evident one, is that the du'a itself should be lawful and performed in a manner that befits humble, needy petition. One cannot pray for help from God to sin against Him. This would include a prayer that might violate the rights of others. A hadith is often cited in which God guarantees a response so long as it does not involve a sin (*ithm*) or "severing relations of kinship [*qati'at rahim*]."[32] Qurtubi extends this qualification to include breaches of general obligations one owes to fellow believers.[33] The prayer also cannot entail asking for what is impossible, such as desiring to attain the rank of a prophet. Such requests are acts of *i'tida* within du'a itself and cause the suppliant to fall into the category of those about whom the Prophet said, "There will come a people who will transgress in du'a." Such transgressions also include, for Qurtubi, excessive public displays of piety and emotion in prayer.[34] Ghazali adds to this list of "transgressions within du'a" artificially and poetically embellishing the prayer. This is because it detracts from the sincerity and humility that should characterize the act of supplication.[35] Humility should also encourage the suppliant to express her prayer in a subdued voice.[36]

The classical thinkers also draw attention to the importance of the inner state that must accompany the supplicatory prayer. Among the most important of these is complete and total presence of heart (*hudur al-qalb*). For the Sufi Ibn 'Ata' (d. 922),[37] this presence forms the "wings of du'a" through which the petition rises to heaven.[38] A humorous story is told of Moses to illustrate its significance. He once passed by a shepherd who was continuously calling upon God with a particular request. Seeing the humble entreaties of this poor man, Moses complained to God that if it lay within his power, he would have granted the man's need by now. "I am more Merciful than you are," God replied, but "while he calls upon Me his heart remains preoccupied with his sheep. I for my part do not answer (the prayer of) a servant while his heart is with another." When Moses informed the man of revelation, he turned his attention entirely to God until his

request was answered.[39] Conversely, the absence of heedlessness (*ghafla*) in du'a, it was said by one authority, induces a divine response without delay.[40]

The state of presence should also be accompanied by a sense of abject humility and need, with an acute recognition of divine sovereignty and overlordship, of God as the only being with the power to grant one's request. In other words, the suppliant should feel a real sense of dependence on God alone, without any trace of reliance on the "secondary causes." This is why Razi states,

> Everyone who prays to God while there remains in his heart even a trace of reliance—on his wealth, social standing, relatives, friends, or his own efforts—in reality has only prayed to God with his tongue because his heart is determined to attain what he wants through (the help of) other than God. Such a person did not (in truth) call out to God in the moment [*fi waqt*]. If he did call out to God in the moment, there would not remain in his heart consideration for anything other than God.[41]

Elaborating on the need for this expression of total dependency on God, Qurtubi and Ghazali note, drawing on a hadith, that one's prayer of petition should not be qualified by "if You will [*in shi'ta*]," even if such words are meant to indicate deference and humility. In other words, one should not say, "My Lord, grant me (this) if You will, My Lord forgive me if You will, My Lord have mercy on me if You will." The form of such a petition suggests that one is not entirely dependent on God; it suggests that one's prayer is marred by a "type of self-sufficiency [*istighna'*]."[42] If one did feel a complete sense of poverty and destitution before the divine, the form of the prayer would reveal a state of need, impoverishment, and reliance. One would ask like a beggar standing before a wealthy, benevolent man or a child before a parent, with no one else to turn to, with total resolution. One would simply say, "My Lord, grant this to me!" Resolution (*'azm*) is so important that one should not stop petitioning just because no response appears to be in sight. To do so would be a mark of haste and impatience and serve in effect to prevent the full fruition of one's du'a, particularly if one leaves in a state of dejectedness and despair.[43] Indeed, a consideration of God's generosity, liberality, and bountiful nature should inspire one to pray, for our authors, with the fullness of one's heart, with complete and total hope (*raja'*). One should, notes Qurtubi, reflect over God's willingness to answer even the petition of Satan when he prayed, "My Lord, give me

respite until the Day of Judgment" (Q 38:79–80).[44] This hope in divine generosity is also reflected in the words of one of the early Sufis, when he said to God, "My Lord, how can I call upon You, when I am a sinner? Yet how can I not call upon You, when You are so generous."[45]

Within the context of these observations on the inner conditions of du'a, brief mention should be made of the "prayer in a state [*du'a fi al-hal*]." This is the prayer that wells up from within the very bosom of the suppliant and which comes out as an uncontainable, irrepressible cry of need. While one cannot typically induce such a prayer, it is the kind of one that, in the words of Sahl al-Tustari, is "closest to being met with a (divine) response."[46] A story is told of Junayd (d. 910), a pivotal figure in early Sufism, to illustrate the power of this kind of petition. A woman once approached him, beseeching him to pray for the return of a missing son. He advised her to be patient. She took his advice but returned later, more desperate than before and with the same request. Junayd gave her the same instructions as he did previously. Again, she obeyed, only to return again. This occurred a few times until she finally lamented her inability to endure patiently her son's absence anymore. He then told her, "If the matter is as you claim, then go. Your son has returned." She left and, true to Junayd's words, found that her son had indeed returned. When she later inquired how he knew, he replied by quoting Q 27:62: *Does He not respond to the desperate one when he calls upon Him, and removes for him his affliction?*[47] Her state of desperation (*idtirar*), Junayd felt, had reached a point that would certainly draw a divine response.

Some final remarks should be made regarding those components of du'a that, although not conditions in the strict sense, serve to facilitate a divine response. Among those that are mentioned in the texts, one finds a particular importance attached to certain time periods (*awqat*) and internal states (*ahwal*), within which one is encouraged to make petitions, such as at the two ends of the day; between the first and second call to each ritual prayer; between the noon and afternoon prayers on Wednesday; on Friday; on the Day of 'Arafa; in the month of Ramadan; and during times of journey, sickness, rain, and ritual prostration, to name but a few.[48] Ghazali says that the importance given to times of religious significance is partly due to the fact that one's mind is more focused and one's spiritual energies will tend to be more concentrated, thereby allowing one to experience a stronger presence of heart.[49] He says, for example, that "the time of early morning [*sahar*] is a time in which the heart is pure and sincere, it is free of disturbances." A similar unperturbed state of mind is also induced, for example, in the

prostration of ritual prayer (*sajda*), in which one experiences or comes close to experiencing self-effacement before the majesty and grandeur of God. Ghazali does not wish, however, to downplay or minimize the objectively unique qualities of the times themselves, stating, in somewhat typical Ghazalian fashion, that there are mysteries (*asrar*) within these periods that remain hidden from the purview of mere mortals.[50]

One also finds with the treatments of du'a a certain degree of importance attached to the physical form of the du'a itself. One should, it is said, make one's petition toward the qibla, facing the Ka'ba, with hands raised so that one can see the whiteness of one's palms.[51] As 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani states, "Propriety in *du'a* requires that one stretch out his two hands, praise God, send blessings of peace on the Prophet, and then request his need. He should not look towards the sky during his *du'a*, and when he completes it, he should wipe his face with his hands."[52] Particular importance is attached to opening and closing the prayer with benedictions on Islam's Prophet. For Ibn 'Ata' these *salawat* are the means (*asbab*) through which petitions are granted.[53]

THE NATURE OF THE DIVINE RESPONSE

Having now looked at the conditions stipulated by many of the exegetical and Sufi authorities for prayers of petition, the question still remains whether, if these conditions are met, God is bound to grant one's requests. The general answer given by the authorities is that the divine response, which Q 2:186 and 40:60 guarantee, is simply that, a "response." The response may not necessarily take on the form for which one has prayed.[54] In the final order of things, there is no way to compel God to grant one's prayer. Without working to meet the conditions of du'a, it is possible that the response might simply be a rejection of one's petition, not unlike a parent denying a child a request or a master rejecting the pleas of a servant. If the request comes from an oppressive tyrant, the response might even appear as a curse from heaven (as a tradition about David states).[55] If, however, one has striven to give the petition its rights, by fulfilling or working to fulfill the conditions outlined above, then the response will be positive, even though, as noted, it may not take on the form for which one has prayed. God, our authors note, will respond in one of a number of ways: He may grant the request one has made, in this world; He may deny it here

but grant it or its equivalent in the next world; He may grant something else in this world; and finally, He may divert an affliction through the merit of the prayer itself, in either this world or the next.[56] Unless one is a tyrant, to make a prayer of petition is therefore always to gain, even though the exact nature of the response will be determined by divine will and decree.

The authorities present a few reasons why God's response may not appear as one hoped for, despite the sincerity of the prayer. It may be that divine wisdom, foreknowledge, and benevolence prevent God from bestowing on the suppliant her desire. Even though the prayer may seem entirely justified, it may result in unforeseen and detrimental consequences. These are consequences that would only be realized by the suppliant after she received her request but which she had no way of seeing beforehand due to her shortsightedness. To this end, a story is told of the saintly ascetic Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (d. 815). A man once approached him in a gathering of his disciples and companions and complained of a handbag that had been stolen and that contained a large sum of money. He asked the holy man to pray for the return of the stolen goods. Ma'ruf remained silent. The man then pressed his request. "What should I say (to God)?" Ma'ruf retorted, "That You should give him what You have deprived Your prophets and pure ones?" A man who was present in the gathering stood up and requested the spiritual teacher to still pray for him, sensing perhaps the desperation of the man. Ma'ruf then prayed, "O God give him what is good (for him)."[57] The open-ended and general nature of Ma'ruf's du'a was intended to protect the man from repercussions that a specific prayer directed at the restoration of such a large sum of money might have. It was this same awareness that led the Persian Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) to declare, "Many a prayer, if heard, would involve destruction, and it is divine wisdom not to answer it."[58]

As noted, the authorities also mention that God may sometimes deprive a suppliant of a sincere, heartfelt request only to reward him with his request, or something comparable, in the afterlife. It has been said that if people could see what God has in store for them as inhabitants of the afterlife on account of prayers that were not granted in the world, they would wish that none of their requests be granted on earth.[59]

Many of the exegetical and Sufi authorities draw attention to the value of supplicatory prayer in and of itself, highlighting the ability of such a prayer to create a bond of communication between the divine and the human. The more contemplative writers note that such a bond is of

greater value that any request one might make. In this light, the response to the petition can be seen as the prayer of petition itself, through which the human being is brought into an intimate relationship with God. Indeed, it was this very consideration that led an early Muslim sage to declare that the "permission (from God) to make a prayer of petition is better for the servant than the gift (which he seeks)."[60] The classical thinkers also recognized the value in afflictions that turned one to God in prayer, aware that the link established between God and the human being through prayer would not arise without the experience of need and destitution. It was this very awareness that led the cousin of the Prophet and one of the earliest of Qur'an commentators, Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687 C.E.), to state that "God will afflict a servant with poverty, desirous of his supplicatory prayer,"[61] a theme that would be developed by subsequent writers, perhaps most poetically by Rumi, who said of the suppliant that God is "pleased by his voice, his saying, 'Oh God!' and his secret prayers." To the extent that God often puts the human being in conditions of suffering, Rumi compared Him to those who "cage parrots and nightingales to hear the sound of their sweet songs."[62] Through this imagery the Persian poet sought to draw attention to the value of affliction to the extent that it kept the human being bound to God through supplicatory prayer. This is why Rumi on one occasion has God say of the suppliant that "it is not because he is despicable that I delay My gift to him."[63] Qushayri even cites a tradition that he attributes to the Prophet of Islam in which God commands the angels to speedily answer the petitions of those whose voices he detests to hear, so that He does not have to endure listening to them, while instructing the angels to delay granting the requests of those whom He loves, because of the pleasure He derives from listening to their humble entreaties.[64]

Razi also acknowledges that the primary purpose of petition lies not in attempting to obtain the object of one's desire but in drawing oneself to a state of "proximity" (*qurba*) with God. Indeed, he considers the ideal state of du'a to be one in which the suppliant even forgets the object of his du'a. In his commentary on Q 40:60, he states in no uncertain terms that "as long as the thought of the suppliant is set on anything other than God, he is not a suppliant (in reality)," adding that "when he becomes annihilated [through du'a] from everything in existence, he submerges in the gnosis of the One, the Real. In such a station it is impossible for him to pay attention to his right, or to seek his own share."[65]

CONCLUSION

This article began by drawing attention to the theological problem of how it is that God responds to every act of human petition, as the Qur'an seems to guarantee in 2:186 and 40:60, when human experience suggests otherwise. While the responses of the classical Qur'anic exegetes and Sufi psychologists to this problem vary considerably, as we have seen, the following conclusions can be drawn, though not without some risk of simplification. There appears to be a general agreement (among those who understand *du'a* to refer to an act of supplicatory or petitionary prayer) that God does indeed respond to every act of petition. The nature of the response, however, will vary from one case to another: First, as for the petitioner who does not fulfill or strive to meet the conditions of du'a, the prayer will likely be met with rejection from heaven. To the extent that God receives and then denies the petition, He has answered and therefore fulfilled His promise to respond. One must, however, not fall into the error of presuming that the prayer was denied simply because one did not meet the conditions of du'a. This is because the conditions in themselves do not guarantee the intended response; they only facilitate it. In the final order of things, "God does what He wills." It is not out of the question that a petitioner who has not striven to meet the conditions may still receive what he asked for, in the way he asked for it, simply out of the generosity of God.

Second, there is the case of the petitioner who has striven to meet the conditions. This is the surest way to guarantee a response in the particular form one desires. However, even in this case, there is no way to guarantee the intended response. The Qur'anic exegetes and Sufi thinkers agree that if one is denied one's petition despite striving to fulfill the rights of prayer, one will receive either the equivalent of what has been sought or better in the afterlife. Now since there is no commensurability between this world and the next, even this "equivalent" will be immeasurably greater, and therefore to be denied in this world is only to gain in the larger scheme of things.

Third, there is the scenario of the petitioner who has asked for something that might not be in her best interests. In this case, God's withholding is actually a giving, because the petitioner is safeguarded from her own ignorance. The gift lies in the very act of deprivation. In such a case a person may also receive something else in this world in lieu of what she prayed for, in which case she is deprived of one gift but blessed with another more

suitable one. A worldly tribulation may also be averted as a consequence of the prayer.

Finally, the more contemplative thinkers note that the greatest response to the prayer is found in no better place than the prayer itself. This is because nothing for which one might pray can surpass the gift of experiencing intimate communion with God. In this light, the very act of prayer, the very "transactional" relation—to return to William James—that is established in the marrow of the prayer, is itself infinitely more valuable than anything the petitioner may seek, by way of worldly or even spiritual gifts. The prayer, from this point of view, is its own response. One might say that the response, in a sense, even precedes the request. To illustrate this view of prayer, Rumi shares the tale of a man who cried out the name of God until, as the poet puts it, "his lips grew sweet with praising Him." The devil, perturbed by the sweetness he derived from invoking the name of God, appeared and said:

> O man of many words, where is the response, "Here am I" to all this "Allah"?
>
> Not single response is coming from the Throne—how long will you say "Allah" with a grim face?
>
> He was broken-hearted and lay down to sleep; in a dream he saw Khidr amidst the verdure,
>
> Who said: Hark! You have held back from praising God: why do you repent from calling Him?
>
> He answered: No "Here I am" is coming to me in response; I fear that I am turned away from the Door.
>
> Said Khidr: Nay, God saith: That "Allah" of thine is My "Here I am," and that supplication and grief and ardour of thine is My messenger to thee.
>
> Thy fear and thy love are the noose to catch My favor,
>
> Beneath every "O Lord" of thine is many a "Here I am" from Me.[66]

NOTES

I would like to thank Lauren Boni, John Harding, Campell Peat, and the anonymous reviewer for their useful comments. The article is dedicated to the memory of the Sufi musician and teacher Janis "Janaan" Orenstein (1948–2010).

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Penguin: New York, 1982), 464.

2. Allahbakhsh Brohi provides a succinct analysis of the inner meaning attached to ritual prayer in "The Spiritual Dimension of Prayer," in *Islamic Spiritual: Foundations*, ed. S. H. Nasr

(New York: Cross Road, 1987), 131–43. For the symbolism of the prayer postures, see William C. Chittick, "The Bodily Positions of the Ritual Prayer," *Sufi* 12 (1991–92): 16–18. See also Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 148–55.

3. For an excellent overview of *dhikr* from within the classical tradition, see Ibn 'Ata'allah al-Iskandari, *Key to Salvation: A Sufi Manual of Invocation*, trans. Mary Ann Danner (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996); Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *The Invocation of God*, trans. Michael Fitzgerald and Moulay Slitine (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000). See also G. C. Anawati and Louis Gardet, *Mystique musulmane: Aspects et tendances, expériences et techniques* (1901; Paris: Librarie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986); Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 167–78. For invocation in the world's religions, see Patrick Laude, ed., *Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religions* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2006).

4. The word derives from a trilateral root, *d-'-w/y*, which means to "call," "summon," or "petition." In the Qur'an God is both the subject and object of this verbal root. He summons the human being to accept His unity and prophets while He is in turn petitioned by the human being to grant his or her wants. For an overview of the use of this root in the Qur'an, see Elsaid Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic–English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 307–9.

5. For prayer understood as supplication within the Sufi tradition, see Annemarie Schimmel, "Some Aspects of Mystical Prayer in Islam," *Die Welt des Islams* (n.s.) 2, no. 2 (1952): 112–25; cf. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 155–67. See also Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use* (London: SPCK, 1961), which covers more than just supplication.

6. *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. "prayer."

7. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 466. On the psychology of prayer, see Friedrich Heiler's classic study, *Prayer: A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, trans. Samuel McComb (London: Oxford University Press, 1932). For a more comparative approach, see Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

8. Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-bayan 'an tafsir al-qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1992), 25:30–31, cf. 2:93.

9. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990).

10. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2004), 2:207.

11. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 471–72.

12. By works of Sufi "psychology" I am referring in particular to that genre of the literature of Islamic spirituality concerned first and foremost with *praxis* or the *'ulum al-mu'amalat*, such as the *Treatise* (*Risala*) of Qushayri or the *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihya' 'ulum al-din*) of Ghazali, in contrast to the more esoterically inclined writings more popularly associated with "mysticism" in the West. For an insightful criticism of this more popular association, see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (repr.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:396.

13. Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86.

14. He attributes these words to Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778 C.E.); Zamakhshari, *Kashshaf* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Abikan, 1998), 5:307. Cf. Qushayri, *Risala*, ed. 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud and Mahmud b. Sharif (Damascus: Dar al-Farfur, 2002), 459.

15. Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86. Zamakhshari cites the words of Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687), according to which "call upon Me, and I will answer" can also mean "declare my Unity, and I will forgive you" (*Kashshaf*, 5:307).

16. See Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbi al-Gharnati, *al-Tashil li 'ulum al-tanzil* (Beirut: Dar al-Arqam, n.d.), 2:234; Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86; Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Shawkani, *Fath al-qadir* (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1998), 4:571; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:206.

17. As in Q 4:117, 6:71. See Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 27:71–72.

18. For discussions of du'a as *'ibada*, see 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya* (Damascus: Maktabat al-'Ilm al-Hadith, 2001), 407; Gharnati, *Tashil*, 2:234; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:206; Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86; Shawkani, *Fath al-qadir*, 1:213, 4:571; Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti and Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, *Tafsir al-jalalayn*, ed. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Arna'ut and Ahmad Khalid Shukri (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1998), 474; Tabari, *Jami al-bayan*, 2:92–94; 'Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alabi (1470 C.E.), *al-Jawahir al-hisan fi tafsir al-qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), 1:144–45, 3:100–101; Wahidi, *Tafsir al-kitab al-'aziz* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1995), 2:948; Zamakhshari, *Kashshaf*, 5:307.

19. Drawing on the classical tradition, the Yemeni commentator Shawkani argues that the most literal meaning of *du'a* "is 'request [*talab*],' and to use it in any other sense is metaphorical" (*Fath al-qadir*, 4:571). Gharnati also highlights his preference for the literal meaning (*Tashil*, 2:234).
20. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya*, 409.
21. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:207.
22. Ibid.
23. For more on this pivotal early Sufi figure, see Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl al-Tustari* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1980).
24. For more on this concept in early Islam, see Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 110; cf. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 160–16.
25. Qushayri, *Risala*, 460.
26. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:208. A slight variant of this passage is also cited in 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya*, 409. The most comprehensive survey of the source material on Ibrahim b. Adham is found in Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1995–96), 1:135–279.
27. Qushayri, *Risala*, 2:208.
28. Qushayri, *Risala*, 459. In Qushayri's Qur'an commentary, a longer version of this saying is cited, with "lawful morsels" stipulated as the only condition for du'a. Qushayri, *Lata'if al-isharat*, ed. 'Abd al-Latif Hasan 'Abd al-Rahman (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 3:140. See also Sulami, *Tafsir al-sulami wa huwa haqa'iq al-tafsir*, ed. Sayyid Imran (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 2:212.
29. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:208.
30. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (Aleppo: Dar al-Wa'i, 1998), 1:522.
31. Ibid.
32. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya*, 407–8; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur'an al-karim* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1996), 2:297; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:208; Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86.
33. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:208.
34. Ibid., 7:144.
35. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:519. But he does not object to the use of poetic prayer formulas, provided the intention is not to impress one's listeners or have as one's primary concern the aesthetic form of the du'a. See also Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*.
36. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:519.
37. For more on this early Sufi figure, see Richard Gramlich, *Abu l-'Abbas b. 'Ata: Sufi und Koranausleger* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1995).
38. Sulami, *Haqa'iq*, 2:214.
39. Qushayri, *Risala*, 460. Cf. Tha'alabi, *al-Jawahir*, 1:146–47.
40. Qushayri, *Lata'if al-isharat*, 3:140.
41. Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 27:71. Cf. Sulami, *Haqa'iq*, 2:212. According to the teacher of Qushayri, Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq (d. 1015 or 1021), "the moment denotes the state that you are in [*al-waqt ma anta fihi*]." In the context in which Razi is using the expression *fi waqt*, he is referring to a prayer in which one is true to one's reliance on God. For definitions of *waqt* in both the technical lexicon of theology (*kalam*) and Sufism, see Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madarij al-salikin*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, 2008), 842–44. For al-Daqqaq's full definition, see 843.
42. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:209. Cf. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:520–21.
43. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur'an*, 1:297; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:209. This should be contrasted with abandoning a prayer of petition out of satisfaction (*rida*) with divine decree or even a "divine rebuke" that follows the petition. These other related issues are addressed by a few of the authors who have been cited so far, but they fall outside the purview of the present analysis. For a brief treatment of these matters, see Qushayri, *Risala*, 456–57. Razi analytically presents each of the arguments raised against the usefulness of prayers of petition but argues against ever abandoning such prayers, attributing the contrary position to the "ignorant" (*al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:83–84). For a modern scholarly treatment of this subject, see Schimmel, "Some Aspects of Mystical Prayer in Islam," 112–16.
44. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:209.

45. Ibid., 460.
46. Ibid., 455.
47. Ibid., 456.
48. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:517–18; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:209; Sulami, *Haqa'iq*, 2:212–14.
49. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:517–18.
50. Ibid., 1:517.
51. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:518; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:209.
52. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya*, 72.
53. Sulami, *Haqa'iq*, 2:212. Cf. Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 1:561. A certain degree of importance is also given to particular prayer formulas that have been transmitted over the generations, originating from either the Prophet of Islam himself or saintly authorities. See Qushayri, *Risala*, 461; Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 161.
54. Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 206–7; Qushayri, *Lata'if al-isharat*, 3:140; Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:85–86.
55. It has been said that God inspired David, "Say to the oppressors from among My servants, do not petition Me, for I have obliged Myself to respond to the one who calls upon Me. My response to oppressors is that I curse them." 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Ghunya*, 408; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*, 2:208.
56. Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-qur'an*, 1:296; Qurtubi, *Tafsir al-qurtubi*; Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:86; Tha'alabi, *al-Jawahir*, 1:144.
57. Qushayri, *Risala*, 461.
58. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 159.
59. Qushayri, *Lata'if al-isharat*, 3:140; Tha'alabi, *al-Jawahir*, 1:145.
60. Qushayri, *Risala*, 463.
61. Sarraj, *Kitab al-luma' fi al-tasawwuf*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 158.
62. Cited in William C. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 243. See also Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 158.
63. Cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 243.
64. Qushayri, *Risala*, 457.
65. Razi, *al-Tafsir al-kabir*, 5:84.
66. Cited in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 165–66. The context of this story, it should be noted, centers around the context of the ritual Islamic pilgrimage. As the pilgrim makes the journey to the Holy House, it is customary practice to chant out "Labbayk allah humma labbayk" [Here I am O God, here I am]. In the *Masnavi*, from where this passage is taken, Rumi uses the motif of the pilgrimage to draw attention to the larger pilgrimage of life, in which, as in the case of the ritual pilgrimage, all humans prayers ultimately have their origin not in the petitioner but in the pre-eternal "call" of God, to which the human prayer is itself a response.