The Pure Intention: On Knowledge of the Unique Name

(Al-Qaṣd al-Mujarrad fī Ma'rifat al-Ism al-Mufrad by Ibn 'Aṭā'Allāh al-Iskandarī)
Khalid Williams (translator)
Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2018. xii + 86 Pages.

In his *Comfort of the Gnostics* (*Salwat al-'ārifīn*), Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. 1077 CE) opens his chapter on *dhikr* by declaring without reservation that "no one reaches Him except through perpetual remembrance."[1] As a religious rite, *dhikr,* silently or aloud, privately or in community, has served as the heart of Sufi piety throughout Muslim history.

Despite the defining role of *dhikr* in Islamic mysticism, we have yet to see a full-length monograph devoted exclusively to the topic in Western scholarship. A number of book chapters and articles, however, have appeared over the course of the last seventy-five years, varying in quality, exploring different facets of the subject. Among them, in 1943 W. Haas published an article in the *Muslim World* on the meditative practices of the Rahmaniyya Order of Algeria.[2] More than thirty years later, another contribution appeared in the same journal, this time by J. Kennedy. It was on the *dhikr* rituals of the "Nubians" of Egypt and Sudan.[3] The Canadian anthropologist and scholar of religion, E. Waugh, explored the role of the *munshidīn* or singers in the *dhikr* ceremonies of Egypt in 1991.[4] Two years later, A. Geels wrote a detailed description of the collective *dhikr* ceremony of the Halveti-Jerrahis of Turkey accompanied by a contemporary psychological analysis of the ritual.[5] This was followed in 1999 by a relatively comprehensive treatment by J. Lumbard of the levels of *dhikr* and their relation to the levels of the self, through the lens of traditional Sufi psychology.[6] In the same year, M. Waley examined modes of contemplation in Persian Sufism with a focus on the theory and practice of *dhikr*.[7] W. Chittick outlined the cosmology of *dhikr* in a short chapter in 2002.[8] More recently, J. Elias contributed to a volume on meditation in the Western Religions where he analyzed *dhikr* as a practice that stands in between prayer and meditation.[9] An essay by S. Bashir in the same work looked at the role of movement and stillness in 14th century Central Asian Sufism.[10] A year later, A. Papas published a paper on *dhikr* and *samā'* in the mysticism of Dahbīdī (d. 1542).[11] The most recent addition to the burgeoning field of *dhikr*-studies has been E. Abuali's article on the vision of colored lights in the Kubrawi Order.[12] And then there are the treatments of remembrance in the works of J. Trimingham,[13] M. Valiuddin,[14] and others,[15] not to mention the

two very good entries on the subject by L. Gardet (*Encyclopedia of Islam*) and W. Chittick (*Encyclopedia of Religion*).[16]

As far as translations are concerned, Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Book of Invocations and Supplications* (*Kitāb al-adhkār wa'l-da'awāt*), the ninth book of the *Revival* (*Iḥyā'*), was rendered into English in 1973 by K. Nakamura, a revised version of which appeared again in 1990 through the Islamic Texts Society (ITS).[17] The same publisher released a translation by M. Fitzgerald and Y. Slitine of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (d. 1350) *Wābil al-sayyib* in 2000. Although entitled *The Invocation of God*, only a portion of the work dealt with *dhikr*. Without question, the most significant text to appear on the subject in English has been M. Danner's translation of *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ* (also by ITS; 1996). Ibn 'Āṭā' Allāh (d. 1309), the Shādhilī author of *The Key to Salvation* confessed in the introduction that his reason for writing the manual was because he had not come across a single adequate treatment of the subject. Few works after it seem to have matched its breadth, scope and degree of influence on later Sufi tradition (outside perhaps of manuals meant for initiated members of specific Orders or *ṭuruq*).

The Islamic Texts Society has continued its invaluable work of making classical texts of Islamic spirituality available in high-quality English editions with the publication of *The Pure Intention: On Knowledge of the Unique Name* (*Al-Qaṣd al-Mujarrad fī Ma'rifat al-Ism al-Mufrad*). Also authored by Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, the precise date of composition of this short treatise on the Supreme Divine Name, *Allāh,* is not known, although it was most likely one of the author's later works. While much of it deals with the Name's theological significance, the text is far from simply a theoretical meditation on its mysteries. Instead, it is meant to help the spiritual aspirant understand the nature of his or her *dhikr*, its transformative effects on the heart, and most importantly, the efficacious power of the invocation of the Name. Williams has done a fine job in his translation, clear to anyone who subjects the two works to a close, line-by-line, micro-analysis.[18] The admirable quality of his carefully crafted final product should not come as a surprise considering Williams's extensive experience in translation. His skills are particularly on display in the way he deciphers some of the trickier passages of the Arabic. Unlike *The Key to Salvation*, however, *The Pure Intention* is not easy reading, and without written commentary or oral instruction by a qualified teacher, there are some sections of the text that will leave most readers baffled. This is not due to the translation, since the ambiguities are present in the original. However, Williams might have considered adding more explanatory notes, especially in the few places where the Sufi master seems to overturn what he says earlier in the work. An example of this can be found in the passages that appear to suggest that the supreme Name is not *Allāh* but *Hū* (pp. 47–48, 52–55). If the tension is resolved by recognizing that the *Hū* is integrated into

Allāh, originating in its final letter (the *hā'*), this might have been clarified and explained in more detail by the translator.

Most of the first part of *The Pure Intention* is devoted to the morphology, etymology, letter symbolism and metaphysical significance of the Name *Allāh*. As for its origin, Ibn 'Aṭā'Allāh notes that there are two views on this question. According to the first, it is a proper name, underived from any other word. The theological position finds scriptural confirmation in Q 19:65 (*Do you know of any who have His Name*?), a verse that may be interpreted to mean, "Do you know of anyone besides *Allāh* who is also called *Allāh*?" (pp. 12–13). As for the advocates of the second view, for them the Name derives from *walah* and/or *lāh*. Williams translates the former as "adoration," in this context, towards an *ilāh* or deity. With reference to *Allāh* (= *al* + *ilāh*), our medieval author stresses that *walah* implies both awe and fear, on the one hand, and joyous rapture, on the other. Both states are respective responses to the soul's contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*basṭ*), since God as the object of human adoration elicits fear and love. The fear is over what may be lost of the divine-human bond, and the love grows out of the amorous rapture of intimacy with one's Origin. As for *lāh*, it carries a double meaning: it may convey the idea of a "veil," since God remains concealed from the eyes of the world; or "height," since like the sun, He stands at the zenith of existence (p. 13). Absent from Ibn 'Aṭā'Allāh's cursory discussion is the argument that the Name stems from *walhān* (from the same *w-l-h* root as *walah*), which means "bewilderment" (*ḥayra*). According to Ibn Juzayy al-Kalbī (d. 1340/41), this particular etymological relation highlights the incapacity of the human intellect to grasp the magnitude and fullness of Allāh. As students of Sufism, particularly of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), know all too well, "bewilderment" plays a defining role in the human being's gnosis or *ma'rifa* of God.

A significant portion of the text is devoted to the symbolism of the letters that make up the divine Name. The entire discussion is premised on the idea that Arabic letters, comprising the building blocks of a sacred language, a language of revelation, has secrets pertaining to both their forms and meanings, and that this knowledge can be used to confer upon the knower a certain measure of power over the world. To quote Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh directly, "God sometimes chooses to honor one of his servants by revealing to them the meaning of the secret of a single letter, or two, or more, according to the portion that was destined for them, and they might use this for anything they desire" (p. 40). This sets the stage for a meditation on the symbolism of the *alif* that opens the Name. We are told that the letter stands upright like Adam, and that the curved *hamza* which accompanies it is like Eve. Together, they produce the progeny of the remaining letters and words. Masculine words are like male children, feminine ones like female children (since Arabic words are gendered). The *nuqṭa* or dot out of which the *alif* emerges is like the drop that was "the first thing God created," and out of which His Book and

creation flowed out (p. 39). But Ibn ʿAṭāʾAllāh also likens the dot to an "unknown treasure" (*kanzan lam tuʿraf*), thereby blurring the ontological status of the *nuqṭa*, since in the famous hadith of the "hidden treasure" (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan*), the treasure symbolizes God Himself. In addition, he also states quite explicitly that the *nuqṭa* as the "basic principle of existence" stands in opposition to nothingness (*ḍidḍ al-ʿadam*). There is clearly a tension introduced in the discussion, centering around whether the *nuqṭa* symbolizes a divine or created principle. It may be resolved, however, if we approach the question through the School of Ibn ʿArabī, for which the "first entification" is divine from one point of view, not-divine from another. However, is this something Ibn ʿAṭāʾAllāh would concede?[19] We cannot explore the question further, due to the constraints of a book review, but perhaps some future researcher may shed more light on the *nuqṭā*'s precise nature in Ibn ʿAṭāʾAllāh's lettrist metaphysics.

As for the meaning-based origin of the *alif* of Allāh, the reader is informed that the name of the letter derives from the same *a-l-f* root from which we get *ulfa* (translated by Williams as "love") and *taʾlīf* (translated as "union"). The semantic field of these three words underscores the idea of God uniting His creatures in love, His obedience, and the recognition of His unity. Love and the desire for union are, after all, for much of the Islamic sapiential tradition, the basic animating forces of existence. With respect to the second letter, it is the "*lām* of possession" (*lām al-mulk*), since when the *alif* is removed from the Name, we are left with *lillāh*, "to God," an expression used to signify divine ownership, as we find in the Qurʾānic verse, *To God belongs all that is in the heavens and earth* (Q 10:55; cf. 23:84–87, 26:31, 30:4). The letter also represents the *lawḥ al-ʿaql* ("the tablet of the intellect") and *lawḥ al-nubuwwa wa-l risāla* ("the tablet of prophethood and messengership"), two sources of knowledge, revelation and intellect, which in Muslim tradition gave rise to the *naqlī* ("transmitted") and *ʿaqlī* ("intellectual") sciences. The third *lām* is also that of possession, since when the *alif* and *lām* that precede it are removed, we are left with *lah/lahu*, "to Him" or "to Whom" (pp. 38–44), an expression frequently employed in the Qurʾān with reference to divine ownership. Finally, the terminal letter is the *hāʾ* of *haybat al-bahā* ("the *hāʾ* of the awe of splendor"), from which we also get the Name of God's *huwiyya* or ipseity (the *Hū*) about which Junayd (d. 910 CE) said, "[it is] the Supreme Name of God" (whence the issue noted above; see p. 47).

The second part of the text deals with the more practical aspects of invoking the Name. This will be of particular interest for those who find the earlier section on abstract theological and metaphysical matters a taxing read. Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh introduces some colorful anecdotes near the end of the first section about the mysterious effects of *dhikr*, and he continues to intersperse his reflections on the Name with these tales to the end. Particularly fascinating is the way he reads Qurʾānic verses sometimes used to describe the merits of remembrance

in general, or some other subject, as references to the invocation of the Name, a hermeneutic strategy made all the more possible because of the fidelity of these interpretations to the literal wording of the text. After all, when Muslim Scripture states, *Remember the 'Name' of your Lord in the morning and the evening* (Q 76:25), or *The Remembrance of 'Allāh' is greatest* (Q 29:45), or *Say 'Allah' then leave them to their idle talk* (Q 6:91), only through the denial of a purely literalist exegesis might one object to the *dhikr* of the Name *Allāh*. Ironically, the theological faction that took issue with the practice did so on the grounds of its own purported faithfulness to the apparent meaning or sense of Muslim revelation. Yet it is precisely through Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's adherence to the strictest outward meaning of these verses that he can justify the invocation. The second part of the work also covers such themes as the stages of the heart's illumination; the difference between the servant's remembrance of God, and God's remembrance of Himself through the servant; and the levels of remembering the Name.

Williams made use of two editions of *al-Qaṣd al-mujarad* for his translation. One of these came out in 2001 through Maktaba Madbūlī (Cairo), the other in 2002 through Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya (Beirut). Those familiar with the state of commercial publishing in the Arab world know that Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya is notoriously unreliable, with their editions often marred by egregious typos and careless mistakes. To be fair, editorial oversights are going to be the inevitable result of cheap, nicely-bound, easily available texts. It was wise, therefore, for Williams not to rely on their edition alone. However, one wonders if the Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya version of *al-Qaṣd al-mujarrad* is not itself simply based on the earlier Maktaba Madbūlī edition, with the result that any errors in the latter were simply replicated in the former. This is because there are some parts of *The Pure Intention* where the same (apparent) mistakes exist in both editions. For example, on p. 70, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh speaks of three modes of invocation, but then only lists two (as the translator notes in a footnote). Elsewhere, on p. 60, he lists five interpretations of the verse, *And the remembrance of God is greatest* (Q 29:45) but prefaces it as a commentary on the phrase "God is greatest," and not the verse itself (with the seeming omission in the text of *wa la dhikr*). A consultation with the manuscript(s) on which the printed versions were ultimately based may have resolved these questions. These minor issues aside, both Williams and ITS should be commended for a contribution that will advance our knowledge of the legacy of the venerated Sufi sage and of modes of prayer and meditation in the history of Islamic spirituality.

Atif Khalil

Associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, where he has been teaching for more than a decade. His research interests lie in Sufism, Islamic theology and philosophy, Islamic virtue ethics, the Judaeo-Islamic tradition, and comparative mysticism. He is the author of Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism *(Albany: SUNY Press, 2018); co-editor of* In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought *(Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); and co-editor of* Islamic Mysticism and Ethics *(Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, forthcoming). Currently he is working on a monograph on the theory and practice of dhikr in Sufism. His more than two dozen articles have appeared in such venues as* Philosophy East and West; Studia Islamica; The Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies; The Muslim World; Journal of Islamic Ethics; Journal of Sufi Studies; and Studies in Religion. *In 2016, he served as the Kenan Rifai Visiting Research Professor at the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at the University of Beijing, China. He completed his doctorate (2009) at the Center for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada.*

Endnotes

1. *Salwat al-ʿārifīn*, eds. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 157 (§ 256).
2. W. Haas, "The *Zikr* of the Rahmaniya-Order in Algeria," *The Muslim World* 33 (1943): 16–28.
3. J. K. Kennedy, "The Nubian *Dhikr* Rituals and Cultural Change," *The Muslim World* 64 (1974): 205–219.
4. Earle H. Waugh, "Ritual Leadership in the Dhikr: The Role of the *Munshidin* in Egypt," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 5, no. 1 (1991): 93–108.
5. Antoon Geels, "A Note on the Psychology of Dhikr: The Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes In Istanbul," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 15 (1993): 53–81.
6. Joseph E. Lumbard, "The Function of *dhikrullāh* in Sufi Psychology," in *Knowledge is Light*, ed. Zailan Moris (Chicago: ABC Press, 1999), 251–274.
7. Muhammad Isa Waley, "Contemplative Disciplines in Early Persian Sufism," in *The Heritage of Sufism: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi* (700–1300), ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 497–549.
8. William Chittick, "On the Cosmology of *Dhikr*," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James Cutsinger (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 2002), 48–63.
9. Jamal Elias, "Sufi Dhikr Between Meditation and Prayer," in *Meditation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 189–200.
10. Shahzad Bashir, "Movement and Stillness: The Practice of Sufi Dhikr in Fourteenth-Century Central Asia," ibid., 201–211.
11. Alexandre Papas, "Creating a Sufi soundscape: Recitation (*dhikr*) and audition (*samāʿ*) according to Ahmad Kāsānī Dahbīdī (d. 1542)," *Performing Islam* 3, no. 1–2 (2014): 25–44.
12. Eyad Abuali, "Words Clothed in Light: *Dhikr* (Recollection), Color and Synaesthesia in Early Kubrawi Sufism," *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* (2019): 1–15.
13. J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 194–217.
14. Mir Valiuddin, *Contemplative Disciplines in Islam* (London: East West Publications, 1980), 31–92. This important study may include the most comprehensive treatment of *dhikr* to date.

15. For some excellent treatments, see Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. N. Pearson (New York: Omega, 1994), 73–76, 103–104; Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 156–187; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:210–214; Valerie J. Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 163–188; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 167–178.

16. Among less focused treatments, mention should be made of S. Nasr's brief comparative analysis of modes of interior prayer in Eastern Orthodox and Islamic spirituality ("The Prayer of the Heart in Hesychism and Sufism," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 31 [1986]: 195–203); and S. Sviri's lengthy piece, not on *dhikr* per se, but the mystical "power of words" in early/proto-Sufism ("Words of Power and the Power of Words: Mystical Linguistics in the Works of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* [2002]: 204–244).

17. The Japanese scholar's translation grew out of his 1970 doctoral dissertation at Harvard on prayer in Ghazālī. See also his "A Structural Analysis of *Dhikr* and *Nembutsu*," *Orient* 7 (1971): 75–98.

18. I have relied on the 2001 Maktaba Madbūlī Cairo edition, one of the two versions utilized by Williams, for my own comparison.

19. The theological problem, common to the monotheistic traditions, essentially rests on the exact ontological status of the "link" (= Logos, Word, Kalima, Kalām, Revelation, Incarnation, Inlibration) that joins God with the world. Is it created or uncreated, divine or not-divine?

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Logos to Bios: Evolutionary Theory in Light of Plato, Aristotle, and Neoplatonism

Wynand De Beer
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Those familiar with the history of Islamic science undoubtedly recognize the influence of Greek philosophy, especially Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism, in shaping the Islamic scientific understanding of the natural world. It was after all the Greek philosophical understanding of causality (material, efficient, formal, and final) which set the context in which Muslims studied the natural world. Premodern science in Islam was therefore an empirical study of nature within the context of certain metaphysical presuppositions which were taken from both religious scripture and Greek philosophy.

The rise of modern science occurred when the central tenets of Greek, particularly Aristotelian, philosophy were discarded in favour of a mechanistic