

# Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation

*Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick  
and Sachiko Murata*

*Edited by*

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*The author has no share save the post of translator, and no portion but the trade of speaker.*

From the preface of Jāmī, *Lawā'ih*, trans. William C. Chittick in Sachiko Murata, *Chinese gleams of Sufi light: Wang Tai-yü's Great learning of the pure and real and Liu Chih's Displaying the concealment of the real realm*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000, 134





# Contents

Foreword	XIII
<i>Seyyed Hossein Nasr</i>	
Preface	XVI
Acknowledgements	XX
List of Figures	XXI
Notes on the Contributors	XXII
Books by William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata	XXVI

## PART 1

### *Sufism in Persianate Contexts*

1	‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s <i>Tamhīdāt</i> : An Ocean of Sufi Metaphysics in Persian	3
	<i>Masoud Ariankhoo and Mohammed Rustom</i>	
2	The Life of the Breath of Life in Rūmī	18
	<i>Kazuyo Murata</i>	
3	Mirrors in the Dream of the Alone: A Glimpse at the Poetry of Bīdil	30
	<i>Ali Karjoo-Ravary</i>	
4	Sufi Gleams of Sanskrit Light	55
	<i>Shankar Nair</i>	
5	Re-reading the Quranic Maryam as a Mystic in Nuṣrat Amīn’s <i>Makhzan-i ‘irfān</i>	77
	<i>Maria Massi Dakake</i>	

## PART 2

### *The Akbarian Tradition*

6	Some Notes on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Correlative Prophetology	97
	<i>Gregory Vandamme</i>	

- 7 Beautiful-Doing (*ihsān*) as the Station of No Station (*maqām lā maqām*) and the Genesis of the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) 117  
*Alireza Pharaa*
- 8 Fear, Deeds, and the Roots of Human Difference: A Divine Breath from al-Qūnawī's *Nafaḥāt* 135  
*Justin Cancelliere*
- 9 Being with a Capital *B*: Ibn Turka on Ibn 'Arabī's Lettrist Cosmogony 150  
*Matthew Melvin-Koushki*
- 10 Jāmī and the Wine of Love: Akbarian Sparks of Divine Light 178  
*Marlene DuBois*
- 11 Al-Qushāshī and al-Kūrānī on the Unity of God's Attributes (*waḥdat al-ṣifāt*) 202  
*Naser Dumairieh*
- 12 The Akbarian Tradition in Hadhramawt: The Intellectual Legacy of Shaykh Abū Bakr b. Sālim 225  
*Omar Edaibat*
- 13 A Sufi Vocabulary from the Sokoto Caliphate: Shaykh Dan Tafa's *Poem on Sufi Nomenclature* (*al-Manzūma li-l-iṣṭilāḥ al-ṣūfīyya*) 260  
*Oludamini Ogunnaike*

### PART 3

#### *Islamic Philosophy and Cosmology*

- 14 Neoplatonic Prayer: The Isma'ili Hermeneutics of *ṣalāt* according to al-Sijistānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw 277  
*Khalil Andani*
- 15 The Necessity of the Return (*al-ma'ād*): Avicenna on the Posthumous States of the Human Soul in *Aḍḥawīyya* 6–7 298  
*Davlat Dadikhuda*

- 16 Greek Philosophy and Sufism in Mecdi's Ottoman Turkish *Gardens of Peonies* 311  
*Rosabel Ansari*
- 17 Sufism and Philosophy in the Mughal-Safavid Era: Shāh Walī Allāh and the End of Selfhood 323  
*Muhammad U. Faruque*
- 18 Light/Darkness Dualism and Islamic Metaphysics in Persianate Context 371  
*Sayeh Meisami*
- 19 Asad Allāh Qazwīnī's Cosmology of the *ahl al-bayt*: A Study and Critical Edition of *Kitāb-i Walāyat-i muṭlaqa* 389  
*Cyrus Ali Zargar and Alireza Asghari*

#### PART 4

### *Hermeneutics and Cross-Cultural Translation*

- 20 Observations on Embodiment and Cross-Cultural Translation 419  
*Amer Latif*
- 21 Translating Islamic Metaphysical Texts: Some Reflections on Knowledge Transmission 429  
*Mukhtar H. Ali*
- 22 Historical Imagination: Voicing Silences in Early Sufi Texts through Narrative 441  
*Laury Silvers*
- 23 The Tao of *ma'rifa*: Adam's Encounter with Hell in Paradise 467  
*Mohammed Mehdi Ali*
- 24 A Supplication for God's Mercy on the Day of 'Arafa by the Fatimid Chief *Dā'ī al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī* 491  
*Tahera Qutbuddin*

- 25 Made in God's Image: A Contemporary Sufi Commentary on Sūrat  
al-Insān (Q 76) by the Moroccan Shaykh Mohamed Faouzi  
al-Karkari 516  
*Yousef Casewit*
- 26 Remembering Toshihiko Izutsu: Linguist, Islamicist, Philosopher 528  
*Atif Khalil*
- Index of Names and Technical Terms 551

# ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s *Tamhīdāt*: An Ocean of Sufi Metaphysics in Persian

*Masoud Ariankhoo and Mohammed Rustom*

Readers of William Chittick and Sachiko Murata’s writings often note their unique ability to discern and effectively communicate the visions of reality animating the various texts in Islamic thought that they study. This is surely because they do not see these works as mere repositories of ideas that make no demands on those who engage with them. Rather, they are akin to shoreless oceans inviting onlookers to plunge in, provided they have no hope of returning. In keeping with this characterization, and as a tribute to our beloved teachers and friends, in this article we would like to offer a drop from one of the deepest of these oceans belonging to the pre-modern period.

## 1 Life and Times

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was born in Hamadan in 490/1097 into a scholarly family with roots going back to present-day East Azerbaijan.<sup>1</sup> He dedicated himself to learning at a young age, and particularly excelled in scholastic theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and Arabic and Persian poetry. Having already authored several major Arabic treatises in fields as diverse as mathematics and poetry, at the age of twenty-four ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt wrote his most important and influential Arabic work, the *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq* (*The essence of reality*). This book is likely the first full-fledged defence of Sufi metaphysics in the Arabic language, and was remarkably written in a matter of two to three days.<sup>2</sup>

The *Essence* was the result of a long period in which our author carefully read the work of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and also took the Sufi Path from al-Ghazālī’s younger brother Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 520/1126). Upon the

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1 For his life, education, and times, see the introduction in Rustom, Mohammed, *Inrushes of the heart: The Sufi philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023.

2 A new Arabic edition and translation of this work is now available: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *The essence of reality: A defense of philosophical Sufism*, ed. and trans. Mohammed Rustom, New York: New York University Press, 2022.



death of his master, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt succeeded him in his function as Sufi shaykh and continued his profession as legal judge in his native city of Hamadan. As a Sufi master himself, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt trained many students, both through oral instruction and written correspondences, the latter of which amount to over 150 letters that have been published under the title *Nāma-hā* (*The letters*).<sup>3</sup>

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt had gotten into trouble with a group of religious scholars in Hamadan in roughly 522/1128. A number of charges were laid against him, mostly having to do with his being a “heretic” on account of his alleged claim to some sort of divine status, his being deemed a sorcerer by his contemporaries, and his supposed belief that he had attained a degree of knowledge that was beyond that of God’s Prophets. He was thus imprisoned for a short while in Baghdad in 523/1129. While in prison, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was given the opportunity to defend himself against these and other related charges, which resulted in his penning a beautiful Arabic literary treatise, *Shakwā l-gharīb* (*The exile’s complaint*).<sup>4</sup> Despite the convincing nature of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s defence, he was sent to Hamadan in 523/1129, where he was executed by the Seljuq state at the age of thirty-four in 525/1131. Present-day Hamadan is host to a memorial complex in honor of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt; but his tomb, which had originally been a site of pilgrimage for several centuries after his death, has not survived.

Readers may notice an uncanny similarity between ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s fate and that of the great Sufi figure al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), to whom ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt had a particular attachment. Like al-Ḥallāj, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was accused of heresy; and, like al-Ḥallāj, his status as a “heretic” was invoked as the reason underlying his state-sponsored execution. But, as is now well-known, al-Ḥallāj’s death was due to deeper, political causes. And the same was the case with ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt. In ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s eyes, many scholars had become exceedingly jealous of his accomplishments. We cannot ascertain whether or not these envious scholars were directly involved in bringing him down. But we can rest assured that they were at least not sympathetic to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s cause, and likely helped fan the flames of the charges made against him.

These charges were a foil for the real reasons behind our author’s execution, which had to do with his strident public condemnation of the Seljuq government’s corrupt administrative and financial practices.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, ‘Ayn

3 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, ed. ‘Alī Naqī Munzawī and ‘Afif ‘Usayrān, 3 vols., Tehran: Intishārāt-i Asāṭir, 1998. A discussion of their nature and content can be found in the introduction in Rustom, *Inrushes of the heart*.

4 For a translation of this text, see ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *A Sufi martyr*, trans. A.J. Arberry, London: Keagan and Paul, 1969.

5 See Rustom, *Inrushes of the heart*, ch. 2 and Safī, Omid, *The politics of knowledge in premodern*

al-Quḏāt also discerned another kind of jealousy at work in bringing about his demise—not human jealousy, but divine jealousy.<sup>6</sup> Like al-Ḥallāj, ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt had revealed the secret of God’s unity and the truth concerning the utter nothingness of human beings before God. He did this in his *Nāma-hā* and public sermons, and especially in his magnum opus in Persian, the *Tamhīdāt* (*Paving the path*).

## 2 Paving the Path

*Paving the path* was completed in 521/1127 and easily ranks among the greatest classics of Sufi literature. It is a work of incredible profundity and sophistication, and can be said to supply some of the stock imagery and expressions that would come to be associated with the classical Persian poetic tradition as seen in the writings of such giants as Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. ca. 617/1220), Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), and Maḥmūd Shabistārī (d. ca. 720/1320). At the same time, this book anticipates many of the doctrinal formulations, themes, and concerns that characterize the perspective of the highly influential Spanish metaphysician Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and the many generations of his followers.

In its modern printed edition, *Paving the path* is just over 350 pages long, and is divided into ten unequal parts. Although ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt wrote this work as a stand-alone text, it also incorporates sections from his aforementioned letters and his oral discourses given to his students.

To a certain extent, ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt drew inspiration from Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s Persian masterpiece on the metaphysics of love, the *Sawāniḥ al-‘ushshāq* (*Apparitions of the lovers*). But the scope and style of *Paving the path* defies classification. It is entirely unique in its method of delivery and in the directness with which the author addresses his points. Although there is a good deal of (mostly) Persian poetry in *Paving the path*, it is by and large a Persian prose work. Yet even the prose in question is of a different order of writing all together. Many of the arguments and topics broached by ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt in *Paving the path* not only depend on this book’s inner logic, but the very language in which and through which his points are made.

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*Islam: Negotiating ideology and religious inquiry*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, ch. 6.

6 The details of this argument are given in Rustom, Mohammed, “‘Ayn al-Quḏāt between divine jealousy and political intrigue,” in *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7.1–2 (2018), 47–73.

For lack of a better term, we may characterize ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s unique language in *Paving the path* as something like “Persian Quranic prose.” Thus, on any given page of this text, one is sure to encounter multiple references to Quranic verses, both overt and covert, which is to say nothing of our author’s extensive use of Prophetic traditions and the sayings of earlier Sufi masters. This Persian Quranic prose, which ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt develops to great rhetorical effect, allows him to paradoxically maintain his own authorial voice (in Persian) while coalescing the Arabic of the Quran with his own words, thereby eliminating his personal voice from the equation. To demonstrate what this looks like, we can do no better than to cite one typical example from *Paving the path*. In this passage, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt tackles one of his favourite subjects, namely “habit-worship” (*‘ādat-parastī*), to which we shall return in due course. Notice how, in the span of only several lines, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt weaves a number of Quranic verses and a couple of Prophetic sayings into the fabric of his argument:

O dear friend! If you want the beauty of these mysteries to be disclosed to you, then let go of habit-worship, for habit-worship is idol-worship. Do you not see how the arrow of this group goes? “We found our fathers upon a creed, and we are surely following in their footsteps” [Q 43:23].<sup>7</sup> Whatever you have heard from creatures, forget it! “A vile guide for man is his conjecture.”<sup>8</sup> Whatever you have heard, ignore it, for “The tale-bearer shall not enter the Garden.”<sup>9</sup> Whatever appears, do not look at it! “And do not spy upon one another” [Q 49:12]. Whatever is difficult for you, only ask with the tongue of the heart, and be patient until you arrive: “Had they been patient until thou camest out unto them, it would have been better for them” [Q 49:5]. Accept the advice of Khidr: “Question me not about anything until I make mention of it to thee” [Q 18:70].<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the unique use of language we find in *Paving the path*, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s style is also distinct in that his statements are at once exhilarating,

7 All translations of Quranic verses in this article are taken, with modifications, from Nasr, Seyyed Hossein et al. (eds.), *The study Quran: A new translation and commentary*, New York: HarperOne, 2015.

8 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, in *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth wa-l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-sihāh wa-l-sunan wa-l-masānid*, v, Vaduz: Jam‘iyyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000, Adab, 80, no. 4974.

9 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth*, iv, Īmān, 47, no. 303.

10 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, ed. ‘Afif ‘Usayrān, Tehran: Intishārāt-i Manūchihri, 1994, 12–13, §18. All translations from the *Tamhīdāt* in this article are adapted from Rustom, *Inrushes of the heart*.

enthraling, and even extemporaneous. Readers get the sense at every turn of the page that the work before them is due to a creative genius that transcends and yet subsumes the personhood of its author. Thus, we find passages peppered throughout *Paving the path* in which ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt tells us that he is not in control of the words that appear on the pages before him and which come through him. In fact, he is often as bewildered over his statements as are his listeners:

Where is this meddling judge of Hamadan from? Where are these words of mysteries from? The speaker does not know what he is saying, so how can the hearer know what he is hearing?!<sup>11</sup>

As ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt saw it, *Paving the path* was a gift given to him by God, which is why he says, “Alas! Whoever wants to hear of the divine mysteries without an intermediary, say, ‘Listen to ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt!’”<sup>12</sup> The divine mysteries which ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt speaks of in this work are many. It contains most of his mature mystical, philosophical, cosmological, theological, epistemological, anthropological, and aesthetic doctrines, not to mention his many musings on the nature of love, language, the function of the spiritual master, the origins of the Quran, and the inner meanings of the rites and symbols of the *sharī‘a*. One example of the latter shall suffice:

In the *sharī‘a*, fasting is an expression of refraining from food and drink, namely the fast of the body. But in the world of reality, fasting is a teaching of consuming food and drink .... This is called “the fast of meaning,” and is the fast of the soul. It is God’s fast: “The fast is Mine.”<sup>13</sup> Why? Because in this fast there is nothing but God.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, *Paving the path* does not really have a beginning, middle, and an end. The experience of reading this masterpiece of Sufi metaphysical literature is more like being thrown into the middle of an ocean than it is like starting out on a journey by foot. The person engulfed by the billows of this majestic ocean will inevitably be taken in by another of its waves even as he struggles for air. The surest strategy, then, is to allow the ocean to be one’s guide.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 15, § 22.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 300, § 394.

<sup>13</sup> Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth*, ii, Tawḥīd, 35, no. 7584.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 91, § 129.

What one finds the more they learn to swim in this manner is that *Paving the path* ties themes and concepts together in such a seamless and natural way that it becomes almost pointless to try to capture this vast ocean into any kind of conceptual jar. This calls to mind the famous lines from the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī:

Were you to pour the ocean into a pitcher,  
how much could it hold? Enough for but one day.<sup>15</sup>

For our purposes, we will have to make do with a schematization of some of the major doctrinal themes and ideas in *Paving the path* as suffices “for but one day.” For those who are as yet unable to swim in this ocean, such an undertaking will give them a sense of the interconnectedness of the ideas that inform ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s worldview.<sup>16</sup> In the following sections, therefore, we will offer one reading of *Paving the path*, attempting to outline how some of its key metaphysical ideas build off of and flow into one another.

### 3 Imagination and Imaginalization

That *Paving the path* accounts for a coherent metaphysical vision can be demonstrated with recourse to one major idea linked to every other dimension of the work, namely imaginalization (*tamaththul*). In classical Islamic thought, the imaginal world came to refer to an intermediary space that brings opposites together, and this allowed Muslim thinkers of various intellectual persuasions to offer new solutions to age-old theological problems. Imagination (*khayāl*) primarily provided them with an objective means to express the manner in which the realm of forms (*ṣūra*) flows into the world of meaning (*ma‘nā*), and the world of meaning into the realm of forms. Although imagination can be traced to a number of earlier Islamic sources, it is commonly acknowledged that it came to the forefront of the discussion largely due to the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī.

Yet many Persian Sufi authors had been drawing on notions of imagination and imaginalization a century before Ibn ‘Arabī. Their source has perplexed scholars for the past several decades. But when we turn to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, the

15 Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Mathnawī-yi ma‘nawī*, ed., trans., and comm. Reynold A. Nicholson, 8 vols., i, London: Luzac, 1925–1940, 20.

16 A detailed presentation of the full range of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s spiritual and intellectual teachings can be found in Rustom, *Inrushes of the heart*.

missing piece of the puzzle emerges. Indeed, he was the first Persian author to discuss imaginalization at length, and this in a manner that would leave an indelible mark upon the later tradition. In explaining the function of imaginalization, ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt makes reference to several well-known instances wherein the angel Gabriel appeared in the form of a man:

See how the discussion drags me from one place to another! ... The foundation of the existence of the next world is through imaginalization, and recognizing imaginalization is no trifling matter! Most divine mysteries are known through imaginalization and are seen through it. Alas! “He imaginalized himself to her as a mortal man, well-proportioned” [Q 19:17] is a complete answer. Gabriel showed himself to Mary from the spiritual world in the garb of a mortal man by way of imaginalization, and she saw him as a man in human form.

One time, Muṣṭafā’s Companions saw Gabriel in the form of a Bedouin. There was another time when Gabriel showed himself to Muṣṭafā in the form of Diḥya al-Kalbī. If it was Gabriel, who is spiritual, how did he assume form so that he could be seen as a Bedouin in the garment of a mortal man? And if it was not Gabriel, who then was seen? Know that it was imaginalization, pure and good.<sup>17</sup>

When ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt says that the “foundation of the existence of the next world is through imaginalization,” he takes this to refer to all eschatological realities, including the very states cultivated by human beings during their time on earth. In the afterlife, these states reappear to them in imaginalized forms: “When a person looks, he sees his own attributes imaginalized. His existence is his punishment, yet he thinks that somebody else is punishing him! But the punishment is his self and is from himself!”<sup>18</sup>

‘Ayn al-Quḏāt also sees in imaginalization the ability to envision God’s manifest and embodied reality:

Alas! “I saw my Lord on the night of the Ascension in the most beautiful form.”<sup>19</sup> This “most beautiful form” is imaginalization. If it is not imaginalization, then what is it? “God created Adam and his offspring in the form of the All-Merciful” is also a kind of imaginalization. Alas! One of

17 ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 293, § 385.

18 ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 289, § 377.

19 Cf. Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, in *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth*, vi, 2000, Tafsīr, 39, no. 3541.

His names is “the Form-Giver” [Q 59:24], that is, He is the maker of forms. But I am saying that Form-Giver means the displayer of forms.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4 Light and Darkness

The concept of imaginalization, or what ‘Ayn al-Qudāt also refers to as the result of the “alchemy” of God’s desire and love,<sup>21</sup> is invoked in *Paving the path* to account for the diversity inherent in the cosmic order:

“He it is who created you; among you are unbelievers and among you are believers” [Q 64:2]. The diversity in the colors of existents is no trifling matter! And one of God’s signs is the diversity in the creation of people: “And amongst His signs is the diversity in your languages and colors” [Q 30:22].<sup>22</sup>

As the above passage suggests, the diversity we see all around us boils down to two positions, namely faith (*īmān*) and disbelief (*kufṛ*). Through the function of imaginalization our author shows us how these two seemingly antithetical terms are closely related to one another by virtue of their being linked to the two principles responsible for the emergence of the cosmic order: the light of the Prophet Muhammad and the darkness of Iblis, both of which are imaginalizations of the divine Sun:

Do you know what this sun is? It is the light of Muhammad that comes forth from the East of Beginninglessness. Do you know what moon this is? It is the black light of ‘Azāzil that emerges from the west of Endlessness.<sup>23</sup>

The upshot of this discussion is that God is a substance and light an accident. Substance was never without accident and will not be. Thus, I have spoken about the heavens and the earth through symbols, namely that two of His lights are the roots of the heavens and the earth—their reality is these two lights. One is the light of Muhammad, and one the light of Iblis.<sup>24</sup>

20 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhīdāt* 296, § 388.

21 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhīdāt* 181, § 239.

22 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhīdāt* 181–182, § 239.

23 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhīdāt* 126, § 175.

24 ‘Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhīdāt* 258, § 340.

O dear friend! This is wisdom: whatever is, was, and will be must not and cannot be otherwise. Whiteness could never be without blackness. Heaven cannot be without earth. Substance is inconceivable without accident. Muhammad could never be without Iblis. Obedience without disobedience and unbelief without faith cannot be conceived. Likewise is it with every opposite.<sup>25</sup>

We are thus presented in *Paving the path* with a metaphysics of light and darkness of the first order, and one in which Iblis is seen as a vital piece to the puzzle of a cosmic plan necessitating that his darkness offset and complement the light of the Prophet. Related to this observation is the fact that, as a master of the outward and inward Islamic sciences, ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt is a firm critic of those whom he labels as “form-seers” (*ṣūrat-bīnān*). He links this group of people to habit-worship and idol-worship, and even identifies habit-worship with what he calls “legalism” (*sharī‘at-warzī*):

The world of habit-worship is the *sharī‘a*, and legalism is habit-worship. So long as you do not perceive habit-worship and let go of it, you will not be in realism (*ḥaqīqat-warzī*). These words are known in the *sharī‘a* of reality, not in the *sharī‘a* of habit!<sup>26</sup>

In short, habit-worship entails selfishness, not selflessness. A person who is given to his deeply ingrained habits, such as his neurotic and excessive nit-picking over matters of religion and law, is a self-lover and not a lover as such. But if he can relinquish all manner of habit, then he will enter the tavern of ruins (*kharābāt*):

How much do you hear? Come out of habit-worship! Even though you have been in school for seventy years, you have not become selfless for one moment! Be in the tavern of ruins for one month to see what the tavern and the tavern-dwellers do with you! O metaphorical drunkard! Become a tavern-dweller. Come so that we can go along for one moment!<sup>27</sup>

Establishing the groundwork for ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt’s metaphysics of light and darkness and his stance against habit-worship sets the stage for his deep critique of

25 ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 186, § 245.

26 ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 320, § 419.

27 ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 340–341, § 452.



any individual who understands religion on a purely exoteric level. Approaching matters in this way allows us to discern unity to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s thought amid what seem like disparate remarks and stray comments: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s critique of religious formalism turns out to be a direct corollary to his conception of light and darkness, which itself is connected to his theodicy and theory of human agency on the one hand,<sup>28</sup> and his doctrine of imaginalization on the other. At minimum, this multi-layered reading enables us to see that the religious formalists for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt account for the outward and “dark” aspect of religion, which is personified by Iblis and his misguidance:

Do you know what that black light is? “He was among the unbelievers” [Q 2:34] was his robe of honor, and the sword of “‘By Thy exaltedness, I shall certainly cause them to err” [Q 38:82] was unsheathed. Without choice, he was cast as a meddler into the darkneses of “the darkneses of land and ocean” [Q 6:97]. The guardian of exaltedness came, serving as the doorkeeper of the presence of “I seek refuge from Satan the accursed.”<sup>29</sup>

You call him “Iblis.” He has taken misguidance as his profession, and curses have become his nourishment: “‘By Thy exaltedness, I shall certainly cause them to err, all together” [Q 38:82].<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, those who have penetrated the inner meaning of religion account for its inward and luminous aspect, which is personified by the Prophet and his guidance:

Alas! Perhaps you have never read that God has an attribute called “the most special attribute,” and which is hidden from all people? Perhaps this most special attribute that is hidden from all is the light of Muhammad? Do you know what I am saying?<sup>31</sup>

Anyone who suffers and is half-slain in the world of Iblis is cured in the world of Muhammad; for unbelief is the stamp of annihilation, and faith the stamp of subsistence. As long as there is no annihilation, subsistence

28 See Rustom, Mohammed, “Devil’s advocate: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s defence of Iblis in context,” in *SI* 115.1 (2020), 65–100. For an inquiry into ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s complex understanding of religion in general and Islam in particular, see Boylston, Nicholas, “Islam from the inside out: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī’s reconception of Islam as vector,” in *JIS* 32.2 (2021), 161–202.

29 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 119, § 168.

30 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 30, § 43.

31 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 268, § 351.

will not be found. In this path, the more the annihilation, the more perfect the subsistence.<sup>32</sup>

These points also significantly relate to another dimension of ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt’s thought, namely his unique understanding of the Quran. Just as Iblis (whose tragic image ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt develops like none other) accounts for misguidance and darkness, so too does he symbolize the black letters in which the Quran is written. And, just as Muhammad accounts for guidance and light, so too does he symbolize the white paper upon which the black letters of the Quran are written. Moving away from misguidance and towards guidance, away from Iblis and towards Muhammad, and away from the black letters of the Quran to their supra-formal, white aspect, one comes face to face with the primordial Quran itself:

Perhaps you have not read or heard this verse in the Quran: “There has come unto you, from God, a light and a clear Book” [Q 5:15]. It calls Muhammad “light” and it calls the Quran, which is the Word of God, “light”: “and those who follow the light that has been sent down with him” [Q 7:157]. In the Quran you see black letters on white parchment. But parchment, ink, and lines are not light!<sup>33</sup>

Alas! We see in the Quran nothing but black letters and white paper! When you are in existence, you can see nothing but blackness and whiteness. But when you come out of existence, the Word of God will obliterate your own existence. Then, from obliteration, you will be taken to affirmation. When you reach affirmation, you will not see another blackness—all you will see is whiteness, and will recite, “and with Him is the Mother of the Book” [Q 13:39].<sup>34</sup>

## 5 Self-Reflexive Love

‘Ayn al-Quḏāt’s doctrine of beauty and love as found in *Paving the path* is inextricably linked to the foregoing discussion. For starters, our author argues that the hearts and spirits of God’s servants can act as mirrors in which He sees His own beautiful image:

<sup>32</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 233, § 302.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 2, § 2.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Ayn al-Quḏāt, *Tamhīdāt* 173, § 229.

The heart knows what the heart is and who it is. The heart is the object of divine gaze, and itself is worthy: “God looks at neither your forms nor your actions, but He looks at your hearts.”<sup>35</sup> O friend! The heart is God’s looking-place.<sup>36</sup>

“My Lord, what is the wisdom in my being created?”<sup>37</sup> The answer came: “The wisdom in your being created is that I should see Myself in the mirror of your spirit and My love in your heart.” He said, “The wisdom is that I see My own beauty in the mirror of your spirit and cast love for Myself into your heart.”<sup>38</sup>

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s main point of emphasis in these kinds of discussions is upon what we can call the “Muhammadan mirror.” Unlike everything in creation, each of which serves as an imperfect and partial site for God’s Self-manifestation, the Muhammadan mirror is the perfect and total site for it:

Anyone who searches for the path of recognition of His Essence, a mirror is prepared for the spirit of his own reality, and he looks in that mirror—he recognizes the spirit of Muhammad. Thus, the mirror is prepared for the spirit of Muhammad. The mark of this mirror has come: “I saw my Lord on the night of the Ascension in the most beautiful form.” In this mirror, “Faces that Day shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord” [Q 75:22–23] is found, and a cry is given in the world: “They did not measure God with His true measure” [Q 6:91]; that is, they did not recognize God with His true recognition.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt maintains that a dimension of God’s infinity involves what we can call Self-negation, which allows for divine delimitation and particularization. Objectively beholding His beautiful form vis-à-vis the particularities of His Self-manifestation, God displays Himself in the mirrors of human souls (which are imperfect). At the same time, He objectively beholds His beautiful form vis-à-vis the totality of His Self-manifestation by displaying Himself in the Muhammadan mirror (which is perfect). What all of this entails is that, even outside of His subjective Self-knowledge, God’s

35 Cf. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Birr, 10, no. 6707.

36 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 146, §198.

37 This question is posed by Abū Bakr al-Nassāj (d. 487/1094), the master of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī.

38 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 272, §356.

39 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 58–59, §79.

gaze is still fixed upon His creatures only because it is really fixed upon Himself qua manifestation:

Alas! O listener of these words! By the spirit of Muṣṭafā, people have imagined that God’s beneficence and love of creation is for them. It is not for them! Rather, it is for Himself. When a lover gives a gift to his beloved and is gentle to her, that gentleness he shows is not for her as much as it is out of love for himself. Alas! From these words you imagine that God’s love for Muṣṭafā is for Muṣṭafā. But this love for him is for Himself!<sup>40</sup>

The logic which informs this perspective is straight-forward: just as God can only know Himself both subjectively and objectively, so too can He only love Himself both subjectively and objectively. With respect to God’s Self-seeing, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt explains it in this way:

Just as God can only recognize God, so too can God only see God. “Show me!” [Q 7:143] had the color of jealousy. “Thou shalt not see Me” [Q 7:143].<sup>41</sup> He said, “O Moses! With your exertion and striving, you will not see Me; with your selfhood alone, you cannot see Me. You can only see Me through Me.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet insofar as God sees His own imaginalized beautiful image through the myriad forms in creation, human beings can likewise contemplate God’s beauty amidst the constellation of refracted images which emerge from His Self-seeing love and beauty onto the mirror of the cosmos. The interplay between love, seeing, and beauty takes us back, once again, to the function of imaginalization:

When one sees increase in beauty and an added form at every instance or every day, love becomes greater and the desire to see the object of one’s yearning becomes greater. At every instant, “He loves them” [Q 5:54] is imaginalized for “they love Him” [Q 5:54], and “they love Him” is, likewise, imaginalized. Thus, in this station, the lover sees the Beloved at every instant in another form of beauty and sees himself in a more perfect and complete form of love.<sup>43</sup>

40 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 217, § 278.

41 These two verses respectively convey Moses’ request to see God and God’s response to Moses.

42 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 305–306, § 402.

43 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 124–125, § 173.

## 6 Conclusion

If this article amounts to nothing but a drop from the vast ocean of *Paving the path*, from one perspective it will have accounted for the ocean itself. As ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt puts it, “A drop from the ocean can itself be called the ‘ocean.’”<sup>44</sup> From another perspective, our attempt has surely been feeble, unlike many others who have successfully taken the plunge into *Paving the path* and have even emerged with some of its precious pearls. Among these successful divers we may count such important medieval Persian authors as ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī (d. before 699/1300) and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492). But it was the Sufis of India who were especially skilled at treading its waters. This was particularly true among authors in the Chishtī and Suhrawardī orders.

The popular reception of *Paving the path* in Indian Sufi circles is evidenced in the writings of such figures as Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā’ (d. 725/1325), Naṣīr al-Dīn Chirāgh Dihlawī (d. 757/1356), Rukn al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. after 738/1337), and Mas‘ūd Bakk (d. 789/1387). The great Sufi master Sharaf al-Dīn Manīrī (d. 782/1380) also draws on this tradition in his oral discourses wherein he speaks of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt with admiration. The culmination of the Indian reception of *Paving the path* comes over two hundred years after ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s death in the form of a detailed Persian commentary upon it by the Indian spiritual teacher Sayyid Muḥammad Gīsūdarāz (d. 825/1422). We also know that, in the 11th/17th century, *Paving the path* was translated into Dakhini by Mīrān Ḥusayn Shāh (d. 1070/1669), and into Ottoman Turkish at around the same time, where it was a staple text of the Mevlevi Sufi order. During this same time period, the great Safavid philosopher and mystic Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640) also drew on *Paving the path* in his highly developed Quranic commentaries.<sup>45</sup>

Even in our own times, a great wave of interest has been generated around *Paving the path* in intellectual and spiritual circles in countries such as Canada, England, France, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United States. Past or present, what all readers of *Paving the path* would surely acknowledge is that it is a testimony to the originality of its author, whose soul, like the book itself, was an ocean without a shore:

44 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 336, § 443.

45 For ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s historical reception, see the introduction in Rustom, *Inrushes of the heart*.

Whatever is learned from people is land and land-like, and whatever is learned from God—“The All-Merciful taught the Quran” [Q 55:1–2]—is ocean and ocean-like. And the ocean has no end.<sup>46</sup>

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46 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt* 8, § 11.