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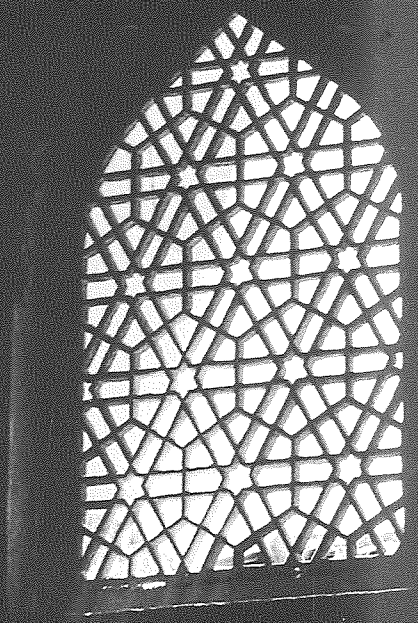

Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice

Edited by Oliver Leaman

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CONTENTS

FIGURES

12

SUFIS

Invoking God's Name and the Practice of *Dhikr*

Raid Al-Daghistani

Sufism as a Way, Knowledge, and Experience

Sufism can be generally interpreted as an inner, mystical dimension of Islam.[1] It is, broadly speaking, a "sphere of spiritual experience which runs parallel to the mainstream of Islamic consciousness deriving from prophetic revelation and comprehended withing the *Shari'a* and theology" (Trimingham 1998, 1). In its formative period (from 10th till 11th century CE) the great Sufi masters and theoreticians attempted to systematically establish it as an "initiatic path" and "esoteric science,"[2] explaining various spiritual concepts, ideas, and techniques for attaining self-realization, moral perfection, and nearness to (and in some cases also *union* with) God.[3] This double character of Sufism as a "way" or "method" (*tariq(a)*) and "knowledge" or "science" (*'ilm*) is essential for understanding its status and role in the Islamic religious history.[4] The Sufi mystical path consists of different "spiritual stations" (*maqamat*) and various "inner states" (*ahwal*), which can be furthermore classified into four fundamental categories:[5] (1) *existential moods* (as, e.g., *khawf* "fear of God," *tawakkul* "trust in God," *raja'* "hope,", *qabd* "contraction," and *bast* "expansion of consciousness"), (2) *spiritual feelings* (as, e.g., *shawq* "longing," *wajd* "rapture," and *hubb* "love"), (3) *mystical forms of knowledge* (as, e.g. *dhawq* "mystical taste," *ilham* "divine inspiration," *kashf* "unveiling," and *mushahada* "metaphysical witnessing"), and (4) *spiritual techniques* or *initiatic methods* among which the ritual practice of invoking God's name (*dhikr*) takes the most important position (al-Daghistani 2017, 202).[6]

However, when it comes to defining the true meaning of Sufism, one will notice that there is neither a single prescriptive nor universal definition of it. The renowned Muslim mystic of the 11th century and the author of the famous "*Epistle on Sufism*" (*Ar-Risala al-Qushayriya*), Abu-l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072), recounts in this regard that when people discuss the meaning of Sufism, each simply speaks from his own mystical experience (al-Qushayri 2007, 289; al-Daghistani 2018, 245).[7] Being aware of this difficulty of defining Sufism, Frithjof Schuon – one of the most influential representatives of the "Traditionalist" or "Perennialist" school of thought – summarizes the nature of Sufism through three fundamental and comprehensive elements: (1) discernment between the real and the illusory, (2) permanent remembrance of the real, and (3) beauty of the soul which manifests in total conformity to the real (Schuon 2006, 133). These three fundamental aspects of Sufism indeed correspond to its three main dimensions: *ma'rifa* the mystical knowledge and spiritual wisdom, *dhikr* the remembrance

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and invocation of God, and *ihsan* the spiritual perfection of the human soul which presupposes total commitment to His will and guidance. In a word, "the aim of Sufism is to emphasize the necessity for gratitude and our entire dependence on God" (Leaman 2019, 168), which manifest in a most beautiful manner precisely in the act of *dhikr*.

Dhikr – The Central Element of Sufi Spirituality

Every authentic spiritual or mystical tradition has a *doctrinal-theoretical* and a *practical-contemplative* side, which represents two complementary dimensions of the same discipline. If the notion of *tawhid* (God's oneness) is the foundation of the Sufi teaching, then *dhikr* is its most important ritual-initiatic practice for the realization of the oneness of God on a fundamentally existential level of human existence.[8] Indeed, "the quintessence of the long history of Sufism is to express anew, in different formulations the overwhelming truth that 'there is no deity but Allah' and to realize that He alone can be the object of worship" (Schimmel 1975, 23). *Dhikr*, which can be translated as "mentioning," "remembrance," "recollection," "evocation," or "invocation" of God or God's most beautiful Names, constitutes the central reality of the Sufis' *modus vivendi* (Nasr 2007, 114) and can be generally regarded as "the keystone of practical religion" of Islam (Nicholson 1914, 45). This initiatic activity, which Sufi masters usually prescribed their disciples as a primary spiritual exercise of contemplation and self-purification, is in the language of Muslim mystics known also as "polishing the mirror of the heart by the remembrance of God" (Meier 1943, 11). The purifying and noetic effects of *dhikr* are described in detail in all important Sufi handbooks from the 12th century onward. Besides the basic daily prayer (*salat*) the remembrance of God is precisely that cardinal spiritual exercise which enables the believer to directly connect with his Creator, deepen his religious consciousness, and thus "unfold" or "revive" his own transcendent primordial nature – *fitra*.

It is relevant at this point to note that the Arabic term for "human" is *insan*, and for "forgetfulness" *nisyan*. This similarity between these terms on the etymological level reflects in some way also their deeper semantic and even metaphysical relationship: a human being (*insan*) is primarily a "being of forgetfulness" (*nisyan*). But bestowed with the primordial spiritual nature, called *fitra*, which is foremost a faculty to believe – a kind of religious *a priori* – humanity has in the Sufi worldview the potential to "remember" and "realize" his real, transcendent nature, and his fundamental connection with God. For the Sufis, *dhikr* is a spiritual method of remembering (and "internalizing") how God functions in an "ideal way" to unfold this deeper nature of the human being, which ultimately exists only in connection or (comm)union with God.[9] 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani (d. 1330) – one of the outstanding Sufi scholars of the 14th century – defines *dhikr* exactly in the light of its "awakening function," as "deliverance from forgetfulness based on the heart's continuous presence with the ultimate Truth" (al-Qashani 2012, 127). According to a sound prophetic tradition (*hadith*), *dhikr* is considered as the very element, by virtue of which the Muslim community (*umma*) differs from all other religious communities in the eyes of God.[10]

The importance and centrality of *dhikr* is expressed and emphasized by all great Sufi masters throughout the Islamic history. There is almost no Sufi manual that does not elaborate on this essential spiritual practice of Muslim mystics, highlighting thereby its numerous different aspects and effects. For al-Qushayri, for example, the true and sincere invocation of God serves primarily as a kind of "spiritual defense mechanism," with which disciples fight against their inner "enemies" (i.e., afflictions, evil thoughts, and carnal desires), while al-Qushayri's teacher Abu 'Ali al-Daqqaq regards the remembrance of God as the very "mandate of sainthood" itself (al-Qushayri 2007, 232–233). Thus, the remembrance of God as a process of increasing one's

awareness of the divine is for the believers a way to overcome their own desires, passions, and negative emotions, and to transcend the state of negligence and forgetfulness. According to Éric Geoffroy, there is no more successful method for combating "the amnesia that affects man, making him forget his divine origins and the pact (*mithaq*) sealed with God in pre-eternity [...]"[11] than *dhikr* (Geoffroy 2010, 162).[12] It is also said that the remembrance of God – which takes a higher position on the Sufi *scala perfectionis* than contemplation (al-Ansari 2011, 54–55) – drives away heedlessness, protects against punishment, and is one of the signs of God's mercy and love. One of the greatest Sufi masters and the author of the important work "*The Sufi Way of Chivalry*" (*Kitab al-futuwwah*), 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), takes the same position on the supremacy of the invocation over contemplation, referring hereby to the Quran itself. al-Sulami writes:

> In my view remembrance is more perfect than contemplation, for God – praise be to Him – attributed remembrance to Himself, while He never did the same for contemplation. And anything that is attributed to God – praise be to Him – is always better than that which is attributed to His creatures.
>
> *(al-Qushayri 2007, 234).*[13]

Contemplation (*fikr* or *tafakkur*), together with invocation (*dhikr* or *tadhakkur*), constitutes the inner structure of epistemic ascent in Sufism, which represents a very complex spiritual process, with the highest goal being the mystical realization of God (*ma'rifa*) and metaphysical resolving of the individual self in the divine Self, *fana'* (a term that will be discussed later in the chapter). For Sufis, remembrance is an indispensable companion of contemplation, which in the best case can help to penetrate metaphysical truths but cannot guarantee the attainment of ultimate tranquility of the heart (al-Daghistani 2018, 253). Reflection or contemplation does not bring about calmness, whereas invocation "has compensations which give joy" (al-Kalabadhi 1935, 96).[14]

There are numerous statements on this topic by the Sufi mystics, which illuminate various dimensions and functions of *dhikr* – this powerful pillar of the Sufi path and "the most excellent of spiritual practices" (Ibn 'Ajiba 2011, 100). But a more profound, holistic meaning of *dhikr* is very beautifully and poetically summarized by an unknown Sufi, who said: "Remembrance is the sinners' antidote and the exile's intimacy. It is a treasure for those who depend on God alone, nourishment for those with certainty, adornment for the seekers, and the public square of the gnostics" (al-Ba'uniyya 2014, 82–83). The practice of *dhikr* as a central way of meditation in Islam, and as a main method of self-refinement and the realization of God, was and remains a firm requisite of Sufi spiritual seclusion (Meier 1943, 11). It is not only the fundamental exercise of the Sufi ritual practice, but also the "axis of Sufism" itself, around which all other elements of their spiritual life and teaching rotate (Lumbard 1999, 274). The maxims like "Practice the remembrance of God, for it is a light for you," or "remembrance of God is the food of the gnostics" (al-Qushayri 2007, 125; 57) make clear that *dhikr* is the central element of the Sufi spirituality, especially regarding the mystic endeavor to reach the nearness and presence of God.

Quranic and Prophetic Foundation of *dhikr*

The Sufi's source for most of their teachings and practices is the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition (*sunna*). That is especially the case with the concept of *dhikr*, which is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an in many passages invites believers to be attentive, aware, mindful, and to remember and invoke God,

the creator and sustainer of all things. It encourages Muslims to "remember Allah with much remembrance" (The Qur'an 33:41),[15] and if a believer remembers God, God will remember him (2:152).[16] The Qur'an assures that in the remembrance of God hearts are at peace (13:28), and that remembrance is even greater than prayer that prohibits immorality and wrongdoing (29:45).[17] There are many examples of how the Qur'an repeatedly encourages Muslims to engage in *dhikr* on different levels. But this "noble religious act" is also addressed by the Prophet Muhammad. In the prophetic traditions (*hadith*) we find many sayings, clearly emphasizing the religious importance and spiritual value of remembering or mentioning God – the ultimate source, from which all things came from and to which all things will return. There is, for example, a tradition recounting how Muhammad once said to his companions that the best and purest of their works in God's eyes is remembering God the Most High (al-Qushayri 2007, 232). According to another well-known *hadith*, the Messenger of God was asked, "what are the gardens of paradise?," to which he replied "The gatherings at which God is remembered" (al-Qushayri 2007, 233). This *hadith* can also be interpreted purely spiritual or metaphysical, in the sense that through the continuous practice of *dhikr* one is eventually able to attain the true paradisiac state – the state of blessing and pure bliss. It is also reported that the Prophet Muhammad has made an allusion, saying, that comparing one who remembers God to one who does not remember Him "is like comparing the living to the dead" (al-Ba'uniyya 2014, 70–71) – an allusion that clearly identifies the invocation of God with the very revival of the (spiritual) heart.[18] According to another narrative, the Messenger of God ranked *dhikr* even higher than almsgiving, stating that a man who invokes God is more excellent than one who spent his dirhams in charity (Ibn 'Ajiba 2011, 101). Moreover, there are numerous sayings of the prophet and of the Holy tradition (*hadith qudsi*), emphasizing the mutual relationship between man and God "meeting" and "uniting" through the act of *dhikr*. Ibn 'Abbas, for example, relates that God revealed to the prophet, that if a believer remembers Him, He will also remember His servant, and that the remembrance of God immediately chases away all evil forces from the heart (al-Ba'uniyya 2014, 72–73).

Based on those and many other verses of the Quran as well as the prophetic tradition, the Muslim mystics developed their own understanding and practice of invocation and made it an indispensable part of their spiritual rites and endeavors. Their main intention for the practice of *dhikr* is to improve religious consciousness, transcend one's own ego, and reach nearness to and eventually even metaphysical communion with God (*fana'/ittihad/jam'*) – the ultimate Reality that for most Sufis can be directly experienced already in this life.

Ritual-Technical Aspects of *Dhikr*

The ritual invocation of God in Islam is a holistic practice that integrates physical, psychological, emotional, existential, and cognitive dimensions of the human being.[19] It is a combination of meditation, contemplation, and prayer, which includes not only specific breathing techniques and body movements, but also mental concentration and emotional connection with the divine Name or with the inner meaning of glorification of God through religious formulae (like *subhana Allah* "Glory to Allah" or *la ilaha illa-l-llah* "There is no god but God"), which is continuously repeated during the *dhikr*-séance. The practice of *dhikr* – which has taken a wide variety of forms across different cultural and geographical landscapes – is the most common ritual by which the Sufi mystics aim to achieve proximity or unity with the Divine (Loevy 2018, 162). In their many forms the practices of *dhikr* are "examples of often highly regulated, explicitly repetitive, and fully embodied actions or vocalizations through which the body comes to appear as a site of profound religious significance" (Loevy 2018,

163). The invocation can be performed individually or collectively, aloud or silent, whereby tongue and heart should co-operate (Nicholson 1914, 46). Although the performance of *dhikr* differs from one Sufi school (*madhab*) or order (*tariqa*) to another, there are some fundamental rules and features that are common to all variations of *dhikr*-rituals. These basic components are (1) a certain body position or posture, (2) a distinctive respiratory rhythm, (3) mental-spiritual concentration and inner renunciation of the external world, and (4) spoken or silent repetitive recollection of God's name, which is usually accompanied by (5) body movements and gestures like swinging the head or the entire upper body[20] and sometimes by (6) religious music or audition (*sama'*). *Dhikr* sessions usually begin with a ritualized liturgy, the recitation of some Quranic verses, prayers and poems about the prophet, or prayers (*hizb/wird*) composed by one of the founders of the Sufi orders (Knysh 2000, 318). Although the procedure of a *dhikr* gathering varies from one Sufi order to another, there is mostly a progression in intensity, which is generally common to all collective performance of ritualized invocation (Geoffroy 2010, 169).

Whether individual or collective, silent or aloud, the performance of *dhikr* always requires certain preparations like, for example, ritual ablution (*wudu'*), sincere intention of the heart (*niya*), opening recitation, and conscious renunciation of the outside world (Knysh 2000, 319). The main purpose of *dhikr* is however not simply to withdraw one's attention from the phenomena of the external world and to concentrate on the inner world, but also to empty one's own mind from all other than God, that is, from all disturbing factors from outside, as well as from one's own thoughts, impulses, desires, and needs.[21] In this sense, the meditative practice of *dhikr* is a *transcending technique* and a *liberation process* par excellence, because it enables the believer to "disidentify" himself with any feeling, thought, or object of consciousness, and through this to open himself to the endless light of the ultimate, divine Reality. From the existential-spiritual point of view, it means that the intentional consciousness of a person who is engaged in *dhikr* is gradually transcended by pure awareness without any content. Exactly therein lies the true epistemic (or gnoseological) value of *dhikr* that can have a fundamental transformative character for the one who practices it.[22]

According to the Islamic tradition, the first concrete instruction on how to perform *dhikr* was given by the Prophet Muhammad himself. When his cousin and son-in-law 'Ali bin Abi Talib (d. 661) asked the prophet which is the shortest and the most excellent path to God, Muhammad called on him to invoke God with closed eyes, testifying *la ilaha illa-l-llah*, "there is no god but God." Thereafter, this practice was first conveyed from 'Ali to the most celebrated mystic of the second generation of Muslims (*tabi'un*), Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), and afterward it was passed down – through Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (d. 815) and al-Junayd from Baghdad (910) – to all the great Sufi masters of spiritual teaching and training in Islam (Ibn 'Ajiba 2011, 101). In this way this short but defining "initiatic event" between the prophet and 'Ali became the very foundation of a later development of *dhikr* as a ritualized and institutionalized method of Sufi spirituality, transmitted from generation to generation, and from master to disciple (Geoffroy 2010, 164).

Although the invocation of God varies not only according to different Sufi traditions but also according to the spiritual stage of the reciter or participant, it normally begins with the first part of the *shahada*, namely *la ilaha illa-l-lah*, "there is no god but God", which is the very principle of the Islamic religion. This phrase is the most common one when practicing religious invocation in Islam. The first part of this formula entails the negation of all but God, whereas the second part signifies the affirmation of God's absoluteness. Another common recitative formula of *dhikr* is God's Name itself, *Allah*, which in the further process of the séance is gradually reduced to the exclamation *lahu* or even just *hu*, whereas the breath emitted by

the uttered letter *h* plays a crucial role in these invocational rituals (Geoffroy 2010, 166).[23] The other *dhikr* formulae usually invocated by Sufis consist of one of God's "most beautiful names," like *al-Haqq* (the "Real"), *al-Qayyum* (the "Self-Existing"), *al-Hayy* (the "Living"), *al-Wahid* (the "Only One"), *al-Fattah* (the "Opener"), *al-Samad* (the "Eternal"), and others. There are at least as many descriptions and different accentuations of the *dhikr* ritual as there are Sufi masters who practice and teach it.[24] However, they are all based on the fundamental components mentioned above.

A very detailed phenomenological description of the method and effects of *dhikr*-performance is given by the great Muslim theologian and mystic Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) in his work *Mizan al-'amal* ("*The Balance of Action*"), in which he instructs the spiritual novice on how to practice the ritual remembrance of God, emphasizing the very transition from the merely verbal invocation to the inner confirmation of the heart and finally to the spiritual illumination through God's mercy. In this manner, al-Ghazali advises the disciple to "sit alone in some corner" and to "reduce his heart to a state in which .... existence and non-existence are the same" (Nicholson 1914, 46–47). He should continue sitting in solitude, and continuously repeat "Allah, Allah," concentrating on the reality of God. In doing so, he will eventually

> reach a state when the motion of his tongue will cease, and it will seem as though the word flowed from it [...] until all trace of motion is removed from his tongue, and he finds his heart preserving in the thought.
>
> *(Nicholson 1914, 47)*

al-Ghazali notes that initially the act is still dependent on the disciple's will and choice; but if he follows the course, then "he may be sure that the light of the Real will shine out in his heart" (Nicholson 1914, 47). This description clearly demonstrates that deep contemplation and intensive remembrance of God can lead a Sufi mystic to spiritual illumination and higher realization. In some cases, the performance of *dhikr* can lead to the mystical ecstasy (*wajd*) and unitive experience of the oneness with the Divine (*jam'* or *fana'*), which is a *non-dual* and *trans-individual* state of pure awareness that can be realized as a result of a deep immersion of consciousness through which the human spirit liberates itself from all disturbing thoughts, feelings, intentions, and perceptions. The remembrance of God is for the Sufis indeed the most important form of reaching the state of mystical ecstasy (*tawajud*). In short, *dhikr* is the most widely recognized disciplinary ritual practice within Sufism for entering into proximity and even metaphysical union with the Divine (Loevy 2018, 162).

Sufi Orders and Their Methods of *Dhikr*

The main reason for the emergence of Sufi orders (*tariqas*), which occurred mostly from the 12th/13th century onward[25] and functioned primarily as mystical schools or teaching centers, was the need for organizing and cultivating religious-spiritual life, enabling Sufis to practice their rites and perform their rituals in collective worship without being disturbed by the outside world and the hustle and bustle of everyday life.[26] The moral-spiritual maxim that underlies the social interaction of the Sufi brotherhoods (and sisterhoods[27]) is a prophetic tradition that declares that "the believer is the mirror of the believer" (*al-mu'min mir'at al-mu'min*) (Schimmel 1975, 228).[28] One of the constituent elements of the order is the relationship between the Sufi master (*murshid* or *shaykh*) and the disciple (*murid*), for whom it "was natural to accept the authority and guidance of those who had traversed the [spiritual] stages" of the mystical path (Trimingham 1998, 4). Moreover, the great *tariqas* came into existence through outstanding

and charismatic Sufi masters who were able to combine their "practical abilities along with spiritual qualities" and mystical insights (Trimingham 1998, 31). These Sufi orders[29] integrated and institutionalized various spiritual practices and meditation techniques "that have become its distinctive hallmarks" (Knysh 2000, 170), like performance of religious chant (*sama'*), ascetic exercises (*zuhd*), contemplation (*tafakkur*), spiritual retreat (*khalwa*), service to the community (*khidma*), and especially the ritual remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

Each Sufi order performs and prefers its own specific way of practicing *dhikr*, which also became a very important subject in the Sufi discourse We are not aiming to give a detailed account of all different *dhikr* performances, but rather to briefly expose some specific features of *dhikr*, practiced by a few different Sufi orders, just to illustrate the complexity and variety of this central spiritual ritual and practice of Islam.

For example, the adherents of the major Sunni Sufi order, Naqshbandiyya (named after Baha' al-Din Muhammad Naqshband (d. 1389), strongly emphasize a silent and permanent remembrance of God which is considered the most important principle of their spiritual teaching (Knysh 2000, 218). Additionally, the Naqshbandi-Sufis recognize three further essential techniques, fundamentally connected to the practice of *dhikr*: (1) the constant examination of one's inner spiritual state (*wuquf zamani*), (2) the enumeration of the times of *dhikr*, performed in order to prevent the intrusion of distracting thoughts and impulses of the lower soul (*wuquf 'adadi*), and (3) the concentration on the physical heart in order to make it participate in the performance of *dhikr* (*wuquf qalbi*) (Knysh 2000, 220). The so-called "quiet *dhikr*" is also much encouraged by the popular Sufi-order Tijaniyya, founded by the great Sufi saint from the Western Sahara, Ahmad al-Tijani (d. 1815), while the members of 'Isawa-brotherhood (founded by Muhammad bin 'Isa al-Mukhtar (d. 1524) practice "spectacular *dhikr* sessions," accompanied by trance and even combined with shamanistic and animistic practices (Knysh 2000, 249). The Sufi masters of the Khalwati-order, which was located mostly in Ottoman Turkey and post-Ottoman Egypt, emphasized personal recollection of God's name, precisely defined in their spiritual manuals. Regarding the collective Sufi gatherings of ritual remembrance of God, adherents of Khalwatiyya distinguish between "seven roots" (*al-usul*) and additional "five branches" (*al-furu'*) of *dhikr*, "each of which is associated with a recollection of a given liturgical formula or one of God's major names" (Knysh 2000, 269).

The Sufi practice of reciting the Names of God occupies also a prominent place in the theory and practice of the Kubrawiyya order (named after Najm al-Din Kubra (d. 1221)), particularly in inducing visionary mystical experience (Abuali 2019, 1). Especially for the early adherents of the Kubrawiyya, the ritual practice of recollection "is intimately connected to the identity of the Sufi community, through a synaesthetic association, informing the visual material, and mental culture of the community" (Abuali 2019, 3). Teaching and training of the Kubrawi method of ritualized invocation had developed into a type of strict initiatic ritual that requires some important preconditions like being in the state of fasting, ritual purity, and spiritual seclusion. If these conditions are fulfilled, then the master starts to recite the formulaic phrase *la illaha illa-l-lah*, whereas the disciple repeats it constantly, remaining vigilant and attentive, with a present heart and intensity of breath, in order to eventually "lift the veils of duality between the practitioner of recollection and God, who is recollected," and thus to finally realize that there is nothing truly in existence save God (Abuali 2019, 4).

But apart from the formal and technical differences in practicing *dhikr* which varies from order to order, the main common feature of these congregational rituals is the intense spiritual experience of the participants, united in their love and commitment to God, longing and striving to reach His Light and even mystical union with Him.

Dhikr of the Tongue, *Dhikr* of the Heart, and *Dhikr* of the Innermost Secret

Alongside the development of Sufi schools and orders, the Sufi practices became also more sophisticated and differentiated. Thus, as we saw above, various forms of ritualized, collective *dhikr* performance were developed. While, for example, some Sufi orders prescribe to their members "loud remembrance" (*dhikr jali* or *dhikr jahri*), others prefer "silent remembrance" (*dhikr khafi*); the former is usually practiced collectively, while the latter is performed mostly individually as a part of self-discipline (Knysh 2000, 318). The very distinction between "loud" or "revealed" and "silent" or "secret" invocation is already mentioned in al-Qushayri's *Epistle of Sufism*, where he clearly illustrates that there are two basic types of ritual remembrance of God, namely, "the remembrance of the tongue [*dhikr al-lisan*] and the remembrance of the heart [*dhikr al-qalb*]", whilst "the continual remembrance of the tongue eventually brings the servant to the remembrance of the heart," in which lies the true effect of this practice (al-Qushayri 2007, 232). The "remembrance of the heart" as a spiritual practice is a transformative process through which the heart expands and is refined. Perfection in the personal state of spiritual wayfarers is achieved only if they can perform invocation with both their tongue and their heart. The remembrance with the tongue should therefore be optimally accompanied by the presence of the heart, without which *dhikr* is after all useless. But beyond the invocation of the tongue and the invocation of the heart Sufis recognize another "third level" of remembrance at which any trace of duality – and so the relationship between the invoker and the Invoked – completely disappears and the mystic is totally absorbed in the "Object" of his invocation. This kind of remembrance that resembles the mystical experience and non-dual consciousness of *fana'* is known as the invocation of the innermost secret (*dhikr al-sirr*) among Sufis.

Éric Geoffroy however notes rightly that these three levels of *dhikr* are merely a simplified schema, since the Sufi masters often distinguish further degrees of remembrance (Geoffroy 2010, 167). 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166), a well-known Sufi from Baghdad and the founder of the Qadiriyya order, differentiates even seven stages of invocation – from external, verbal remembrance of God through silent, contemplative invocation, right up to the pure metaphysical witnessing and even mystical union with the Divine (al-Jilani 1994, 80; al-Daghistani 2017, 56).[30]

Fana' – The Final Goal of *Dhikr*

As already mentioned, the fundamental spiritual aim of *dhikr* is ultimately the purification of the heart and the increasing awareness of God, which is direct outcome of the contemplative practice of remembrance and invocation (Knysh 2017, 85). But in many cases an intensified form of devotional act of *dhikr* often leads to ecstatic experience, mystical ecstasy, and even to the phenomenon which in Sufism is considered to be the ultimate goal of a mystic in his spiritual ascent – *fana' fi-llah*, the "annihilation" of the individual consciousness in the absolute Consciousness of the Divine.[31] This means that he who dedicates himself to *dhikr* with an outmost commitment, and succeeds to reach deeper in the contemplative states of consciousness, becomes gradually "completely imbued with the Named to the point of being extinguished in Him." This phenomenon in Sufism is known as *al-fana' fi-l-madkhur*, "the annihilation in the Remembered/Invocated One," and signifies the mystical experience, in which the created being "is returned to the state of non-differentiation with God" (Geoffroy 2010, 164).[32] In this final analysis, *dhikr* becomes "the act of God Himself within us," because in reality only God can

truly "utter His Name," so that in the act of *dhikr* "we become simply the instrument through which God utters His own sacred Name" (Nasr 2007, 101).

However, for the Sufis this metaphysical "annihilation" of the ego or individual self does not mean the obliteration of human consciousness as such, but, on the contrary, the realization of the higher, *non-dual consciousness*, which transcends the subject–object relationship. The mystic is, as it were, totally "emptied" of himself and "filled" with the overwhelming power of the divine Reality that utterly penetrates his consciousness and embraces his whole being. Reynold A. Nicholson observes correctly that the

> whole of Sūfism rests on the belief that when the individual self is lost, the Universal Self is found, or, in religious language, that ecstasy affords the only means by which the soul can directly communicate and become united with God.
>
> *(Nicholson 1914, 59)*

In this sense, *dhikr* serves as an "initiatic method" of attaining the transformation of consciousness through the unitive mystical experience of the ultimate reality. A Sufi mystic reaches his spiritual end when he fully realizes his non-existence with regard to the everlasting existence of God. In this regard, a famous Sufi saint Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 946) said "that the Sufi should be even as he was before he came into existence" (Nicholson 1906, 344), that is, beyond duality of the phenomenal existence in the transcendent reality of divine Oneness. The experience of *fana'* induced through the initiation practice of *dhikr* can therefore be understood as the most genuine and real mystical experience, which is, at the same time, in its nature *transcultural* and *universal*, and which differs from all other religious or spiritual experiences not merely in a quantitative degree, but in principle. Because an *authentic* mystical experience, in the strict sense of the word, begins only with the emergence of an unsubstantial, non-content, non-dual, and trans-phenomenal state of *pure consciousness* that transcends any subject–object relationship (Stace 1961, 110).[33] A Sufi mystic who reached this level of spiritual experience is "resurrected" in divine Reality (*baqa'*) after he was "annihilated" from his own self. In the context of the Sufi spirituality, *fana'* – the highest peak to which the meditative practice of *dhikr* can lead – therefore represents an existential realization of *tawhid*, which is the very quintessence of Islam.[34]

Dhikr – Islamic Spirituality for Today?

One's spirituality is at last, among many other factors, defined by the attitude toward one's own mortality and conception of the afterlife. Muslims believe that each soul will "taste" death (3:185),[35] that is, individually experience it, and that after death all humans will meet their Creator. The Sufis however generally believe that the encounter with the Creator – which according to mystical teaching is the ultimate ground of our own soul and being – is already possible in this world, namely, in the rare moments of ecstatic mystical experience (*wajd*) and metaphysical self-annihilation (*fana'*), which can be attained (precisely) through the spiritual ritual of *dhikr*, which is still today continuously practiced not only collectively in some secluded Sufi lodges and schools but also individually all around the world.

Although the *fana'* experience may be the highest end of *dhikr*, it is not its only purpose or objective. On a daily basis the meditative practice of *dhikr* helps believers to either reestablish or strengthen their relationship with God and deepen their religious and spiritual consciousness. It enables them for a while to free themselves from the turmoil of their own impulses, thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and to experience the ataraxia of the heart as a harmonic and fulfilled state of being.

Karl Rahner, one of the most eminent and influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century, said once that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all," emphasizing thereby that the mystical experience is a genuine experience of the divine Reality "emerging from the very heart of our existence" (Rahner 1981, 149). Éric Geoffroy made a similar statement about Islam, when he titled his book *L'Islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus* ("*Islam will be spiritual or will not be*"), arguing for the "spiritual *jihad*" and "revolution of meaning," consisting primarily in inner purification, dynamic understanding of religion, personal-experiential approach to the Divine, and cultivation of spiritual values like inclusiveness, love, and an integral worldview (Geoffroy 2009a). What both thinkers clearly recognized is that the necessary condition for the survival of religion, or rather, for the survival of the believer, is his own capacity for spirituality, which in the current context should be understood in a holistic and integral sense as *experience*, *practice*, *knowledge*, *awareness*, *virtue*, and *action*. And already decades before Geoffroy, Malik Badri noticed in his work on *Islamic psychospiritual study* that cognitive principles and practices, such as mindfulness, contemplation, and meditative invocation of God (*dhikr*), which have only recently begun to influence modern Western psychology, were well known and continuously practiced by Muslim mystics, who were already discussing the positive effects of such practices on psycho-physical health and spiritual balance of the human being centuries ago (Badri 2000, 21). Besides that, the religious formulas of *dhikr* are in the Muslim world until today used as alternative "healing methods" for anxiety, inner turmoil of the soul, and other mental difficulties and afflictions.

The Sufi way of remembrance of God, *dhikr*, which is based on exact breathing techniques and which integrates ritual, physical, mental, and spiritual aspects in one existential whole, remains today a central element not only of the Sufi institutionalized practice but also of the Islamic spirituality in general. Although firmly rooted in the Islamic religious tradition (and narrative), *dhikr* manifests also a fundamental universal character, consisting precisely in its meditative-contemplative dimension, with profound purifying and liberating effects on those who practice it. Therefore, the practice of *dhikr* – be it collectively or individually, silent or aloud – can also in modern times offer spiritual nourishment for all who seek a moment of spiritual seclusion in the midst of daily life and long for the experience of the "Reality beyond the reality."

Notes

1 There are of course attempts to define Sufism more broadly in a sense of a "whole religion in small," because Sufism indeed encompasses all the dimensions which also Islam as a religion encompasses – from doctrinal, through ritual to epistemic and ethical aspects. For more on this, see Knysh (2017).

2 The science of Sufism (*'ilm al-tasawwuf*) as an esoteric science signifies "the science of the actions of the interior which depend on the interior organ, namely, the heart (al-qalb)" (al-Sarraj 1914, 8, 23–28). See also al-Kalabadhi 1935, 74; Geoffroy 2009a, 21; and al-Daghistani 2017, 199–202.

3 See, for example, al-Sarraj (1914), *The Kitab Al-Luma' Fi'l-Tasawwuf*; al-Hujwiri (2000), *Kashf al-Mahjub: The Revelation of the Veiled*; al-Qushayri (2007), *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*; and al-Kalabadhi (1935), *The Doctrine of the Ṣūfis*.

4 More on the notion of Sufism as a mystical path and spiritual science, see, for example, al-Daghistani (2017).

5 Despite the differences in opinion among Sufis about the number as well as the order of inner states (*ahwal*) and spiritual stations (*maqamat*), it is possible to show some of the basic characteristics of both dimensions in the light of classical Sufi texts. According to general opinion of the Sufis, spiritual "states" are generally considered to be something that "descends" upon the heart of the meditator, irrespective of request and effort. They are therefore considered basically as something that emerges spontaneously, whereas spiritual "stations" are acquired by one's own inner struggle. Therefore, the "stations" are firm and last longer, whereas "states" are constantly changing. If the "station" presents an

achieved level on the spiritual path, then the "state" signifies a kind of existential feeling or an inner mood that appears as a result of the mystic's effort. One can reach a "station" mostly by means of his or her own actions and by acts of self-discipline, whereby the precondition of advancing from one station to the next lies in fulfilling the requirements of the former. In short, *ahwal* are experiences and perceptions; *maqamat* are spiritual techniques and methods (see al-Qushayri 2007, 78; see also al-Daghistani 2017, 26–34).

6 The other important and most established methods and practices of Sufi spirituality are "religious audition" (*sama'*), "concentration on God" (*muraqaba*), "training in renunciation" (*zuhd*), "reflection" on the Quranic text (*tafakkur*), and "spiritual seclusion" (*khalwa/'uzla*) for the purpose of meditation, and examination of one's own conscience (*muhasabah al-nafs*).

7 In his paper published in 1906, a renowned English orientalist Reynold A. Nicholson extracted no less than 77 (from more than hundred existing) definitions of the term "Sufi" and "Sufism" (*tasawwuf*) chiefly compiled from the works of Abu-l-Qasim al-Qushayri, Fariduddin 'Attar and Jami. For the context of the present chapter, the following definitions of Sufism and Sufis may be interesting: "[The Sufis] are folk who have preferred God to everything, so that God has preferred them to everything" (Dhu-n-Nun al-Misri); "[The Sufi] is made pure by his Lord, and is filled with splendours, and is in the quintessence of delight from praise of God" (Abu Sa'id al-Kharraz); "[The Sufi] is he to whom nothing is attached, and who does not become attached to anything" (Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri); "[Sufism] is, to renounce all selfish gains in order to gain the Truth" (Abu al-Husayn al-Nuri); "[Sufism] is this: to be with God without attachment (to aught else) [...]" (al-Junayd); "[Sufism] is praise of God with concentration [...]" (al-Junayd); "[Sufism] is: to be observant (of God) in all circumstances and to be constant in self-discipline" (Abu Muhammad al-Jurayri); "[Sufism] is purity and spiritual vision" (Abu Bakr al-Kattani); and "[Sufism] is the purity of nearness (to God) after the defilement of farness" (Abu 'Ali al-Rudhabari) (see: Nicholson 1906, 331–347).

8 As one of the leading Western orientalists of the 20th century noted, "Islamic mysticism is the attempt to reach individual salvation through attaining the true *tauḥīd*" (Schimmel 1975, 23).

9 Sara Sviri points to the dialectical dimension of *dhikr*, insofar the ultimate experience of *dhikr* means to fully enter in God's presence through *forgetting* everything but God: "In a state of complete absorption in the invocation of God's name, everything disappears form the orbit of perception, imagination, or comprehension. The mystic is absorbed in all-encompassing nothingness" (Sviri 2002, 124).

10 According to this *hadith*, angel Gabriel said to Prophet Muhammad, that God said: "I have given your community something that I have not given to any other community". After the Messenger asked what that is, Gabriel answered: "God Most High said: 'Remember Me and I will remember you!' He has not said that to any other community'" (al-Qushayri 2007, 235).

11 The primordial and pre-historical pact between God and humanity (*mithaq*) is expressed in the following verse of the Qur'an:

> And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we have testified.' [This] – lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Indeed, we were of this unaware.'
>
> (Qur'an 7:172)

12 For the importance of the Islamic invocational practice in the context of spiritual psychology of the Sufis, see Lumbard (1999).

13 But although *tafakkur* is ranked lower than *tadhakkur* in the overall structure of Sufi spiritual psychology and mystical epistemology, in a way, invocation presupposes contemplation. Thus, al-Junayd (d. 910), a great mystic of Baghdad, states that if man mentions God without first reflecting and contemplating on His reality, man is simply a liar (al-Kalabadhi 1935, 97). This means that invocation is authentic only if it is based upon contemplation. In this context, another Sufi mystic says: "The heart is for contemplation, the tongue for making expression of the contemplation: if a man gives expression without having contemplated, he is a false witness" (al-Kalabadhi 1935, 97). Remembrance of God and contemplation of His Majesty, *tadhakkur* and *tafakkur*, are therefore ultimately two complementary methods of Islamic spirituality and two fundamental components of its epistemology. They are not just two stages among the spiritual stations (*maqamat*) that a Sufi wayfarer must reach on their "initiatic" path, but also the existential and epistemic constants, which accompany their inner journey through different stages and states. Or as al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) beautifully put it: "Men of knowledge have been resorting to

thought with the remembrance of God, and to the remembrance of God with thought, imploring the hearts to speak until the hearts responded with wisdom" (Badri 2000, 31).

14 al-Shadhili (d. 1258), a great North-African Saint and founder of the Shadhili Sufi order, recognizes the connection between deep invocation and harmonized ataraxia of the heart on one hand, and meta-rational realization on the other hand: "The real devotional recitation (dhikr) has to do with what is tranquilized, that is, the heart, and what is revealed in the spiritual realities of the clouds of illumination, on the clouds of the Lord" (Ibn al-Sabbagh 1993, 166).

15 In his mystical commentary on the Qur'an *Lata'if al-isharat* ("Subtleties of mystical allusions"), al-Qushayri explains that the mystical allusion to this verse is "love of God," because "someone who loves something, remembers it often." Such a remembrance is for al-Qushayri the "remembrance with the heart," because it is the only one "possible to sustain permanently" (al-Ba'uniyya 2014, 66–67).

16 al-Qushayri explains that for the literalists the phrase "So remember Me" means "with proper conduct," and "I will remember you" means "with miracles," whereas for the people seeking mystical allusions, the first part means "by leaving everything else," and the second part "by resurrecting you in My reality after annihilation from yourself" (al-Ba'unuiyya 2014, 62–63).

17 al-Qushayri notes that the remembrance of God is greater than the prayer "when [it] is free of seeking any benefit in exchange, whether out of fear of punishment or in hope of reward" (al-Ba'uniyya 2014, 68–69). This, however, does not mean that the *dhikr* renders basic prayer (*salat*) or prayer of supplication (*du'a*); quite on the contrary, it rather "deepens them so that ultimately all aspects of worship become as many modes of one's constant remembrance" (Lumbard 1999, 260).

18 For the Sufi scholar Abu Khalaf al-Tabari (d. 1077) the invocation of God is the very nourishment of the believer's heart: "The sustenance of the heart lies in the remembrance of the Living who never dies" (al-Ṭabari 2013, 57).

19 The invocational and contemplative prayer of *dhikr* includes all the elements of our being and has – in its higher stages – an unifying power that integrates and unites body, soul and spirit "in a consciousness that transcends the individual level" (Nasr 2007, 101).

20 The motions of the body – which correspond to the inner movements of the soul – can vary not only due to varying rhythms but also due to the dynamic of the group of participants: "Sometimes the participants hop in one place, bending their knees, swinging the torso back and forth, sometimes even completely bending over. They then finish by jumping, with the head raised and like one who is striving for the freedom of the air, because the soul-spirit seeks to take off, to escape from the world of matter. Sometimes they pivot the chest from left to right, then back again, in a pendulum-like movement that increases in pace; the arms remain loose, and follow the alternation naturally", while the main role of the masters, standing in the center of the circle made by the participants, is to assure "that each one is in rhythmic harmony with the others, and to limit the inevitable excesses" (Geoffroy 2010, 170).

21 It is in this light that Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 945), an important Maliki Scholar and Sunni mystic from Baghdad, defines Sufism as "to be guarded from seeing the phenomenal world," to "control the faculties" and observe the breaths (Nicholson 1906, 344).

22 According to al-Niffari, one should turn one's attention completely toward the experience of *dhikr* itself, and not deal with any kind of thought that may occur during the invocation. In his contemplation al-Niffari experienced God's intervention, revealing to him: "When thou stayest befor Me, everything will call thee: do thou beware of listening to it with thy heart, for if thou listenest to it, it is as though thou hast answered it." (al-Niffari 1935, 24:2).

23 The other most common phrases in practicing *dhikr* are *subhana-llah* ("Praise the Lord"), *Allahu akbar* ("God is greater"), and *al-hamdu-li-llah* ("Thank God").

24 According to Alexander Knysh, the work that probably best summarizes various *dhikr* practices is *Al-Salsabil al-mu'in fi-l-tara'iq al-arba'in* ("The Wellspring of Assistance in the Forty Sufi-Orders") written by the founder of the Sanusiyya brotherhood, Muhammad al-Sanusi (d. 1859). An extensive analysis of the nature and specific features of *dhikr* as an individual practice and spiritual experience is given by the third Grand Master of the Shadhiliyya order, Ibn 'Atta' Allah of Alexandria (d. 1309) in his work *Miftah al-falah* ("Key to Salvation") (Knysh 2000, 318–320).

25 Smaller institutions or Sufi lodges called *zawiyas* and *khanaqahs* "which provided temporary resting-places for wandering Sufis" emerged already in 11th century and "played a decisive role in the Islamization of borderland and non-Arab regions in central Asia and north Africa" (Trimingham 1998, 9).

26 For a detailed examination of the historical development of Sufism and its organizational aspects, see a classic work of J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (1998). For the formation of

Sufi brotherhoods and organization of Sufism as an Islamic religious and spiritual institution, see also Schimmel, *Sufism: Eine Einführung in die islamische Mystik* (2008), 68–90.

27 Abbas talks explicitly about "Sufi brotherhoods and sisterhoods," that have been established in the Islamic world throughout the centuries (Abbas 2003).. See also Prenner (2016, 42)..

28 The practical application of this maxim enables the Sufis to "see in the behavior and actions of their companions the reflection of their own feelings and deeds," and to gradually realize their moral and spiritual perfection (Schimmel 1975, 228).

29 The most known and widespread Sufi orders are, among others, Shadhiliyya, 'Alawiyya, Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya foremost in Maghreb and West Africa; Sanusiyya and Khatmiyya especially in sub-Saharan Africa; Khalwatiyya, Bektashiyya, and Yasawiyya predominantly in Turkey; Qalandariyya in Central Asia and Anatolia; and Chistiyya, Kubrawiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Kubrawizza, and Qadiriyya most notably in Mughul India and in the Caucasus.

30 The seven levels of *dhikr* according to al-Jilani are the following: "the remembrance of the tongue" (*dikhr al-lisan*), "the remembrance of the soul" (*dhikr al-nafs*), "the remembrance of the heart" (*dhikr al-qalb*), "the remembrance of the spirit" (*dhikr al-ruh*), "the remembrance of the secret" (dhikr as-sirr), "the remembrance of the inner consciousness" (*dhikr al khafi*), and "the remembrance of the innermost consciousness" (*dhikr al-akhfa al-khafi*). As already mentioned, the gradation of *dhikr* varies from one Sufi master to another, but most of them undertook a threefold classification. 'Abdullah al-Ansari (d. 1088), also known as the "Sage of Herat," differentiates, for example, the following three stages of remembrance: (1) remembrance through fear of what is hidden and for the unseen outcome, (2) remembrance through hope with respect to "sincere repentance, caring intercession, and luminous mercy," and (3) remembrance through supplication and neediness with respect to one's familiarity with pre-eternal Divine grace. At this level, the believer gazes upon his Lord with an open heart (Ansari 2010, 96). In his famous manual on the teachings of the Sufi schools (*Kitab Al-Ta'rruf li ahli madhab at-tasawwuf*), Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi (d. 995) also divides *dhikr* into three fundamental levels, referring thereby to Ibn 'Atta´ Allah (d. 1310), who takes a quite different approach of categorization in contrast to al-Ansari. The first is invocation of the Divine in the heart, meaning that the Divine had previously been forgotten, and then recalled and remembered; the second is the invocation of the Divine attributes which are now present in one's mind and heart; and the third is the invocation that turns into pure mystical vision (*shuhud/mushahada*) of the Divine Reality (al-Kalabadhi 1935, 98). Against the background of this gradation of *dhikr* it is clear that there are not just quantitative differences of invocation, but also qualitative differences in performing the ritual remembrance of God.

31 Knysh notes that in this sublime condition

> the experience of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and of the unification of the human self with the Divine Essence reaches its apogee. [...] All duality disappears in the act of the voluntary self-annihilation of the reciter in the presence of God [...] The personality of the Sufi is thus dissolved in the all-encompassing divine unity that no longer allows any duality within it.
>
> (Knysh 2000, 321)

32 Titus Burckhardt (d. 1984), one of the most remarkable 20th century experts on Sufism, explains the metaphysical relationship between the epistemic and ontological aspects of *dhikr*, stating that in "invocation the ontological character of the ritual act is very directly expressed," in the sense that "here the simple enunciation of the Divine Name, analogous to the primordial and limitless 'enunciation' of Being, is the symbol of a state or an undifferentiated knowledge superior to mere rational 'knowing'" (Burckhardt 2008, 90). The aim of this profound Sufi practice is thus to transcend mental activity and enter a completely different realm of experience, that is, a pure spiritual experience (*tahaqquq*), which at its final stage results in the mystical annihilation of the individual consciousness into the Divine consciousness (*fana'*). A very eloquent description of the process of such an experience is given again by Burckhardt:

> When the individual subject is identified with the Name to the point where every mental projection has been absorbed by the form of the Name, the Divine Essence of the Name manifest spontaneously, for this sacred form leads to nothing outside itself; it has no positive relationship except with its Essence and finally its limits are dissolved in that Essence. Thus union with the Divine name becomes Union with God (*al-waṣl*) Himself.
>
> (Burckhardt 2008, 90)

33 "The Unitary Consciousness, from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded, so that there remains only a void and empty unity" (Stace 1961, 110).

34 For a detailed analysis of *fana'* in the context of Sufism, see, for example, al-Daghistani (2017, 60–75).

35 "Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection" (The Quran 3:185).

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