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In the Name of Letters: Basmala as the Cosmic Design

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This paper is a study of Ḥaydar Āmulī's (d. ca. 787/1385) analysis of the basmala in his commentary on Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. While Āmulī addresses this phrase, which he regards as the foremost verse in the entire Quran, in various sections of his work, his most comprehensive discussion focuses on the basmala with which Ibn al-ʿArabī initiates his *Fuṣūṣ*. Āmulī thoroughly analyzes the basmala and investigates its diacritical marks, numerical symbolism, lexical components, syntactic structures, and morphological dimensions within a lettrist framework. As will be argued, he transforms the basmala into a formula that captures the cosmic design and serves as a lettrist means of reflection to express physical, spiritual, and cosmological realities. Broadly, the paper contributes to the evolving scholarly understanding of lettrism, the unique place of the basmala in Islamic thought, and the growing body of scholarship on Āmulī's works.

INTRODUCTION

"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate (*bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*)," which is known as the *basmala* (henceforth, basmala) or *tasmiya* in Islamic literature, is at the beginning of all suras of the Quran except *surat al-Tawba* (9).[1] It also has a significant presence in Islamic spirituality, practices, and rituals. In a hadith attributed to the Prophet, it is stated, "Every matter that does not begin with 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate' is doomed to fail."[2] It is in this spirit that Muslims often invoke the basmala at the beginning of every important act, sanctifying and consecrating it with this formula.[3] Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 787/1385), one of the leading Shiʿi thinkers and a significant figure in the history of the Islamic intellectual tradition, approached the basmala as a verse that encompasses a wide range of esoteric, philosophical, and lettrist dimensions. He regarded it as the foremost verse in the entire Quran, a recipe that harmoniously unifies the celestial and earthly realms and encompasses both the beginning and the culmination of all creation.

This article, firstly, argues that Āmulī's detailed study of the basmala provides a valuable lens for understanding his intellectual framework. While he interpreted various teachings of the celebrated mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) from a Shiʿi perspective, reducing him solely to a sectarian reader would be inaccurate as he formulated an inclusive, compre-

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1. For a discussion of how this phrase can be translated, see B. B. Lawrence, "Approximating *Sajʿ* in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of *Sura* 93 (*al-Ḍuhā*) and the *Basmala*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7.1 (2005): 64–80.

2. For this hadith, see Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar Fakhr al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 33 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1441/1990), 1: 163; Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Tafṣīl wasāʾil al-shīʿa ilā taḥṣīl masāʾil al-sharīʿa*, 30 vols. (Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt ʿAlayhim al-Salām li-Iḥyāʿ al-Turāth, 1374*sh* [1996]), 7: 82, 170.

3. See "Basmala" (B. Carra de Vaux [L. Gardet]), *EI2*, 1: 1084–85. Hāshim Mūsawī Jazāʾirī has gathered a wide range of hadith about various aspects of the basmala in *Āthār wa-barakāt bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm fī al-Qurʾān wa-l-ḥadīth* (Nājī al-Jazāʾirī, 1393*sh* [2013]).

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hensive, monotheistic, and universal system to explain the entirety of the cosmos.[4] In this context, Āmulī's analysis of the basmala is a pertinent example of how his universal model reshaped his understanding of Islamic concepts and ideas. Rather than regarding the basmala solely as a quranic verse with mystical depths and layers, he saw it as a cosmic blueprint and symbolic representation of the entire world—a universal formula that encompasses all of existence, extending from the past to the future and from the celestial to the earthly realms.

Secondly, the article argues that while lettrism may imply a focus solely on letters and their mystical, esoteric, and occult attributes, Āmulī's analysis of the basmala reveals a broader scope as his approach goes beyond examining the basmala's individual letters. In contemporary scholarship, the term lettrism has been frequently employed to identify *ʿilm al-ḥurūf*, which constitutes a prominent branch of occult sciences throughout Islamic history. The recent surge of scholarly studies on lettrism has opened promising avenues for understanding it within the broader scope of Islamic intellectual history.[5] Nevertheless, our understanding of its origin, historical progression, and development remains relatively nascent.[6] Āmulī's analysis of the basmala serves as a valuable addition to our evolving appreciation of lettrism and its multidimensional nature. It particularly challenges the idea that lettrism solely pertains to letters and demonstrates that it encompasses far more than letter-ist or letter-based approaches alone. While letters indeed constitute a significant aspect of the lettrist tradition, their esoteric, cosmological, and occult properties represent a fraction of the broader scope of this science.

As we will see, Āmulī's analysis is an illustrative example of this nuanced understanding since it covers the various linguistic elements of the basmala, such as diacritical marks, short and long vowels, numerology, letters, words, phrases, syntax, and morphology. He particularly explains the significance of the three divine names within the basmala: *Allāh*, *al-raḥmān*, and *al-raḥīm*. This approach aligns with the tradition that attributes special significance to God's most beautiful names (*asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*), granting them a distinct and elevated position.[7] In this way, this case study calls for a broader understanding of lettrism

4. For the inclusive nature of Āmulī's thought, see M. A. Mansouri, "Casket of Light, Padlocked with Light: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Ahl al-Bayt*, and Shiʿi Philosophical Esotericism," *Shii Studies Review* 7.1–2 (2023): 1–33.

5. For some of these studies, see P. Garrido Clemente, "El imaginario de las letras en el Islam: Primer tratado sobre las letras enigmáticas del corán, el *Kitab Jawass al-Hurüf* de Ibn Masarra," in *Los imaginarios de las tres culturas: Murcia, 2008 curso de la Universidad Internacional del Mar*, ed. J. M. Jiménez Cano (Ayuntamiento de Murcia, 2009), 153–64; N. Gardiner, "Lettrism and History in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī's *Naẓm al-sulūk fī musāmarat al-mulūk*," in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. L. Saif, F. Leoni, M. Melvin-Koushki, and F. Yahya (Brill, 2021), 230–66; N. Gardiner, "Diagrams and Visionary Experience in al-Būnī's (d. 622/1225) *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt fī al-ḥurūf al-ʿulwiyyāt*," in *Visualizing Sufism: Studies on Graphic Representations in Sufi Literature (13th to 16th Century)*, ed. G. M. Martini (Brill, 2023), 16–50; M. A. Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology: The Occult Mysticism of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. c. 787/1385)," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 9.2 (2021): 161–201; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Pseudo-Shaykh Bahāʾī on the Supreme Name, a Safavid-Qajar Lettrist Classic," in *Light upon Light: Essays in Islamic Thought and History in Honor of Gerhard Bowering*, ed. J. Elias and B. Orfali (Brill, 2020), 256–90; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light," *al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 24 (2016): 42–113; M. Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text: Mīr Dāmād and the Neopythagoreanization of Philosophy in Safavid Iran," *Studia Islamica* 114.3 (2019): 378–431; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Being with a Capital *B*: Ibn Turka on Ibn ʿArabī's Lettrist Cosmogony," in *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation*, ed. M. Rustom (Brill, 2023), 150–77; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Safavid Twelver Lettrism between Sunnism and Shiʿism, Mysticism and Science: Rajab al-Bursī *vs*. Maḥmūd Dihdār," *Global Intellectual History* 8.4 (2023): 1–38; L. Saif, "From *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Šams al-maʿārif*: Ways of Knowing and Paths of Power in Medieval Islam," *Arabica* 64.3–4 (2017): 297–345; C. V. Uy II, "Lost in A Sea of Letters: Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥamūya (d. 1252) and the Plurality of Sufi Knowledge" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2021).

6. For a recent study of Āmulī's lettrism, see Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology."

7. This aspect will be extensively dealt with below.

that intricately rearranges and reassesses every linguistic element within a framework shaped by numerology, cosmology, and the occult.[8] It is thus imperative to recognize lettrism as a legitimate and valid philosophy of language, which represents a religio-scientific pursuit to comprehend the intricacies of the cosmic design and its enigmatic aspects.

While Āmulī discusses the basmala in various places, his most concentrated discussions can be found in his commentary on Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, entitled *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Āmulī's commentary is divided into two distinct sections. The first section, known as *al-muqaddimāt*, stands as an independent text and a comprehensive introduction to his own thought.[9] The second section features Āmulī's commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. However, before beginning his commentary, he provides a detailed analysis of the basmala, spanning six sections, each titled an "aspect" (*wajh*, pl. *wujūh*).[10] After analyzing the major contours of Āmulī's commentary on the basmala, this article proceeds to explore his discussion also in six sections; this organization allows for a detailed study of specific elements related to the basmala while maintaining a cohesive flow and mirroring Āmulī's own textual organization.

Henry Corbin has briefly discussed the basmala in Āmulī's works; his analysis is mostly limited to Āmulī's *al-muqaddimāt* but he does examine Āmulī's more extensive examination of the topic at the beginning of *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*.[11] It is worth noting that Corbin faced criticism for dismissing the significance of lettrism. As Matthew Melvin-Koushki states, "Lettrism is here again a case in point: Corbin and his disciples after him transmogrify this, the most Islamic of the occult sciences, encompassing various forms of letter magic and letter divination and rooted equally in the Quran and in Hellenistic precedent, into the epitome of perennialist Shiʿi esotericism."[12] Āmulī's work provides a notable example. Corbin broadly contextualizes Āmulī's ideas within the framework of "the science of balance" (*ʿilm al-mīzān*) and traces its origins to the Jābirian alchemical tradition. However, a major flaw in this narrative is that Āmulī himself does not employ this term in his writings, so using it as a comprehensive framework lacks philological justification. Although Āmulī introduces his basmala commentary as a lettrist project, showcasing himself as a lettrist *par excellence*, the lettrist nature is erased by Corbin, who banishes it into a broadly defined "esoteric" category of the science of balance. Therefore, Corbin's utilization of the science of balance is another instance of his overlooking lettrism in favor of constructing frameworks that do not always align with our primary sources.

Āmulī employs the term lettrism specifically in the context of his basmala analysis. After discussing a wide range of the meanings of the letter *bāʾ* of the basmala, he writes, "these subtle allusions (*ishārāt*) and noble metaphors (*kināyāt*) are among the benefits of lettrism (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*). Otherwise, these illusions would be useless and these references would be

8. *ʿIlm al-ḥurūf* is also known as *ʿilm al-jafr* (the study of divination) or *jafr* alone, but it is not clear how this association was made in history. On *jafr* and Āmulī's view on it, see Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology," 163–64, 171–80.

9. The introduction was first edited by ʿU. Yaḥyā and H. Corbin as *al-Muqaddimāt min Kitāb Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Qismat-i Instītū Īrān va Farānsa-yi Pizhūhish-hā-yi ʿIlmī, 1352*sh* [1974]). A new edition of both the introduction and commentary was later completed by Muḥsin Bīdārfar (see next note); I use both editions when needed.

10. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ al-fuṣūṣ li-Muḥyī l-Dīn ibn ʿArabī*, ed. M. Bīdārfar, 3 vols. (Bīdār, 1394*sh* [2015]), 2: 856–922.

11. H. Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, tr. P. Sherrard (Kegan Paul International, 1986), 55–132.

12. M. Melvin-Koushki, "Is (Islamic) Occult Science Science? *Theology and Science* 18.2 (2020): 303–24, at 308.

futile."[13] This passage illustrates that Āmulī clearly viewed his commentary on the basmala as a lettrist enterprise. However, he abstains from furnishing a hierarchical arrangement of Islamic sciences and does not explain its standing within the hierarchy of knowledge. In contrast to Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī (d. 835/1432), who supplants Sufism with lettrism, positioning it as the pinnacle of Islamic sciences,[14] Āmulī maintains a clear stance that Sufism retains its status as the foremost branch of knowledge and represents the authentic embodiment of the esoteric teachings of the Imams. Thus, while lettrist analyses occupy a significant place in Āmulī's works, lettrism is not the ultimate Islamic science and we are also unaware of how it fits into his understanding of the hierarchy of knowledge.

1. ḤAYDAR ĀMULĪ AND THE BASMALA

Understanding the diverse meanings of the basmala was an established aspect of Islamic thought before Āmulī. A systematic examination of its various connotations, for example, can be found in the work of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), who often begins his Quran exegesis of different suras by explaining the basmala and its individual letters.[15] Another example is Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī's (fl. sixth/twelfth century) *Kashf al-asrār*, where he presents several short analyses of the basmala.[16] Similar interpretations are also evident in the esoteric literature of Ismaili writers. For instance, Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 462/1070) dedicates an entire section to the mystical dimensions of the basmala and their alignment with Ismaili teachings.[17]

These developments reached an unparalleled peak in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī, who elevated the basmala into an ontological formula to capture the totality of existence.[18] The immediate followers of Ibn al-ʿArabī, such as Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) and ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. ca. 730/1330), further explained the mystical dimensions of the basmala. For instance, in his *Iʿjāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Qurʾān*, Qūnawī comprehensively analyzes *Sūrat al-Ḥamd*, the opening sura of the Quran, and sheds light on the correspondences between the microcosm and the macrocosm through the hidden meanings of letters (*asrār al-ḥurūf*). He particularly elaborates on the constituent letters of the basmala, such as *hamza*, *alif*, *sīn*, *mīm*, as well as the divine names the Merciful (*al-raḥmān*), the Compassionate (*al-raḥīm*), and Allāh.[19] Kāshānī also begins his Quran commentary by providing a concise survey of the basmala, its constituent letters and words, along with specific insights into certain letters such as *alif* and *bāʾ*.[20]

13. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 878.

14. Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology."

15. For example, see ʿA. Ḥ. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, ed., *Tafsīr al-Qushayrī al-musammā Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1428/2007), 1: 8–9.

16. For examples, see the ten-volume edition by ʿA. A. Ḥikmat (Amīr Kabīr, 1371*sh* [1992]), 1: 1, 26–30, 41–42; 3: 554–55; 6: 4–5, 15–16; 7: 14, 90, 283–84, 374; 8: 203, 385, 455–56; 10: 78, 190, 120, 163, 231, 291–93, 188–391.

17. Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Vajh-i dīn*, ed. Gh. R. Aʿvānī, 2nd ed. (Intishārāt-i Anjuman-i Shāhanshāhī-yi Falsafa-yi Īrān, 1384*sh* [2005]), 124–29.

18. See D. Gril, "Commentaries on the *Fâtiha* and Experience of the Being According to Ibn 'Arabi," https://ibnarabisociety.org/commentaries-on-the-fatiha-denis-gril/. See also W. C. Chittick, "Ibn al-ʿArabī's Hermeneutics of Mercy," in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. S. T. Katz (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 153–68, at 160.

19. Qūnawī, *Iʿjāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Qurʾān*, ed. J. Āshtiyānī (Būstān-i Kitāb-i Qum, 1381*sh* [2002]), 120–33.

20. Kāshānī (pseudo-Ibn ʿArabī), *Tafsīr Ibn ʿArabī*, ed. S. M. Rabāb, 2 vols. (Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1422/2001), 1: 7–8.

Therefore, Āmulī's interpretation of the basmala should be viewed within the wider framework of the Akbarian tradition, although he introduced two novel elements. Firstly, he claims to have recognized the necessity of composing a specific commentary on the basmala, a task his predecessors had not undertaken. In essence, he maintains that while other commentators had examined the basmala, their ideas were dispersed across various sources, lacking a systematic organization. He informs us that,

> Before examining the subject matter, it is imperative to commence with an examination of "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate," along with its interpretations (*taʾwīl*), and researching (*taḥqīq*) the hidden riddles (*rumūz*) and allusions (*ishārāt*) it encapsulates. None of the previous commentators ventured into such territory. At this point, we must employ transmitted reports (*naqliyyāt*). For example, the Prophet, peace be upon him, stated, "Every matter that does not begin with 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate' is doomed to fail." If neglecting to invoke the basmala at the outset of ordinary affairs leads to their failure, then neglecting to elucidate its meanings and truths and uncover its secrets, which constitute the most profound matters, will undoubtedly lead to even greater deficiencies. [. . .] According to most exegetes, the basmala is a verse from the Quran. If reciting it holds such significant virtues and ranks, then how much greater would the virtues of its truths, meanings, and knowledge be? It is narrated from the Prophet, peace be upon him, that, "Whoever wishes to be redeemed from the nineteen guardians of hell (*al-zabāniyya al-tisʿata ʿashar*) on the day of resurrection should recite 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,' because it consists of nineteen letters and God will make each letter of it a shield against each guardian of the hell."[21] If only reading the basmala has these great values and ranks, how great would it be to interpret and research it?[22]

According to Āmulī, the omission of the basmala before undertaking even ordinary tasks results in their deficiencies. That is why he begins his commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* by explaining the meanings and hidden layers condensed in the basmala. Āmulī emphasizes the distinct significance of his basmala commentary and notes that it is a pioneering work of its kind. He is correct in observing that previous Akbarian commentators did not specifically examine the basmala in a separate section of their commentaries, but an early lettrist understanding of the basmala and its elements is characteristic of the teachings of Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931), who inaugurated the lettrist tradition brought to its peak by Ibn al-ʿArabī. Only a comparative study, which is beyond the scope of this paper, can shed light on what is unique and innovative in Āmulī's analysis and what was borrowed from earlier writers.

Secondly, Āmulī's analysis of the basmala stands out when compared to the works of previous Sufis and mystics such as Qūnawī, Kāshānī, Maybudī, and al-Qushayrī, all of whom included it in their commentaries on the Quran. As said, Āmulī thoroughly explains the basmala in his commentary on Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, and not in his extensive and multivolume commentary on the Quran.[23] While he does not explain why he chose the *Fuṣūṣ* over the Quran for his analysis, one can discern the rationale behind this decision by

21. The nineteen angels of punishment in this passage refers to Q 74:30. This hadith is recorded in many sources, but particularly in the *tafsīr* tradition. See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. ʿA. ʿA. al-Turkī and M. R. ʿArqasūsī, 24 vols. (Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1427/2006), 1: 143; Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī, *al-Taysīr fī al-tafsīr*, ed. M. A. Ḥabbūsh, 15 vols. (Dār al-Lubāb, 1440/2019), 1: 42; Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa-l-bayān ʿan tafsīr al-Qurān*, ed. Ṣ. Bāʿuthmān et al., 33 vols. (Dār al-Tafsīr, 1436/2015), 2: 275–76. For this hadith in Shiʿi exegesis, see al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. H. al-Maḥallātī and F. al-Yazdī al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 10 vols. (Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1408/1988), 1: 90.

22. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 3: 856–57.

23. Āmulī, *al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam wa-l-baḥr al-khiḍamm fī taʾwīl kitāb Allāh al-ʿazīz al-muḥkam*, ed. M. al-Mūsawī al-Tabrīzī, 7 vols. (Muʾassasa-yi Farhangī va Nashr-i Nūr ʿālā Nūr, 1375– [1995–]). His exegesis of the basmala

contextualizing it within his broader intellectual agenda. As Āmulī explains, the two texts are entirely identical as both were shared with humanity by the Prophet. The Quran was revealed to the Prophet (*al-nāzil ʿalayhi*) and shared publicly with people during his lifetime, while *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* was issued from him (*al-ṣādir minhu*), but not publicly disclosed as the circumstances were not conducive for its dissemination. Thus, both the Quran and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* belong to the Prophet—the former was revealed to him during his lifetime while the latter remained out of public reach until the time of Ibn al-ʿArabī, who translated it for humanity.[24] Similarly, per Āmulī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* was a book revealed or delivered to Ibn al-ʿArabī (*al-wāṣil ilayhi*) and *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* was a book issued from him. In a similar vein, he considers his own commentary on the Quran a book revealed to him (bestowed upon him) (*al-fāʾiḍ ʿalaynā*), and his commentary on *Fuṣūṣ* issued from him.[25] Table 1 helps put this in a clearer perspective.

Table 1

	The Revealed Book	The Issued Book
The Prophet	Quran	*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*
Ibn al-ʿArabī	*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*	*Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*
Āmulī	The Quran commentary	The *Fuṣūṣ* commentary

Based on these parallels, Āmulī viewed his Quran commentary and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as akin to the Quran itself. Hence, one could argue that his choice to conduct a detailed study of the basmala of *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* rather than of the Quran reflects this interconnectedness. In other words, by initiating his analysis of the basmala before delving into *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, Āmulī spotlights the fundamental connection between this book and the Quran.

2. THE FIRST ASPECT: ON THE LETTER *BĀʾ*

The basmala commences with the letter *bāʾ*, which makes it a unique letter in the Quran and bestows upon it a distinctive position among all Arabic letters. This letter particularly captured the attention of prominent earlier Sufis, including Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 282/896), Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 377/988), and, of course, Ibn al-ʿArabī.[26] Āmulī frequently cites prophetic and Imamic hadith, as well as passages from earlier mystical scholars to convey the merits of this letter. It is essential to grasp this approach within the broader scaffold of Āmulī's project, which showcases the inherent compatibility between these various sources of knowledge and underscores the harmonious relationship that exists among them. For example, he cites the reported statement of ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who declared, "If I wanted, I could load seventy camels with the secrets of the *bāʾ* of *bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*,"[27] and the Prophet's reported saying, "All beings appeared from the *bāʾ*

at the beginning of the Quran in his own commentary falls short of the level of detail found in his commentary of *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.

24. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. N. Aḥmad (Maktabat Miṣr, 1436/2015), 6.

25. E. Tasbihi, "Visionary Perceptions through Cosmographical Diagrams: Mystical Knowledge from Ḥaydar Āmulī's (d. 787/ 1385) *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 69 (2021): 31–81, at 40–41.

26. For a recent study of "the betic cosmology" in Ibn al-ʿArabī's works and its later adoption by Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī (à la Āmulī), see Melvin-Koushki, "Being with a Capital *B*."

27. It appears that Āmulī's source for this hadith is Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-qulūb* (ed.

of *bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*,"[28] as well as the saying of Ibn al-ʿArabī, " with *bāʾ*, being appeared, and with the dot the worshiper became distinct from the worshipped," along with Abū Madyan al-Maghribī's (d. 594/1198): "I have not seen anything unless *bāʾ* was written on it."[29] This textual amalgamation not only highlights the exceptional significance of the letter *bāʾ* but also underlines the inherent harmony between the prophetic, Imamic, and Sufi teachings in Āmulī's works. As for the letter *bāʾ*, he explains that,

> Just as the letter *bāʾ* in the basmala, which is a verse from the Fātiḥa and the Quran, became encompassing (*jāmiʿ*) of whatever that is in the Quran, the first being that corresponds with the letter *bāʾ* in the ontological and contingent basmala (*al-basmala al-wujūdiyya al-imkāniyya*) became encompassing of whatever that is in the universal and macrocosmic book (*al-kitāb al-ilāhī al-kullī al-āfāqī*). The letter *alif* signifies the hidden, general, and absolute being (*wujūd al-bāṭin al-ʿāmm al-muṭlaq*), and the letter *bāʾ* points to the apparent, contingent, distinguishing, supplemented, and conditioned being (*al-wujūd al-ẓāhir al-mumkin al-mutaʿyyan al-muḍāf al-muqayyad*). Therefore, the initial being to which the absolute being was a supplement was the first intellect and the greatest spirit, serving as the conduit through which non-being transitioned into being and as an intermediary connecting the eternal (*qadīm*) to the transient (*ḥādith*), which mirrors the transformation of the letter *bāʾ* from the letter *alif*. Undoubtedly, the letter *bāʾ* was differentiated from the letter *alif* through the distinguishing dot written beneath the letter *bāʾ*, which parallels how the first being was distinguished from the absolute oneness of the essence (*al-dhāt al-aḥadiyya al-muṭlaqa*) with the assistance of the contingent and subservient dot (*al-nuqṭa al-ʿabdiyya al-imkāniyya*) [. . .].[30]

This dense passage summarizes Āmulī's analysis of the ontological significance of the letter *bāʾ*. To understand how the dot changes *alif* to *bāʾ*, one should look at their graphical shapes and morphological features. The letter *alif* is represented by a straight vertical line, while *bāʾ* is represented by a curved line with a dot underneath. That dot distinguishes it from the letter *alif*. This dot, indeed, is a visual marker that transforms the simple vertical line of *alif* into the curved line of *bāʾ*. It adds a distinguishing characteristic to the letter, altering its shape and sound. This narrative morphologizes the creation of the world and how the first intellect (*bāʾ*) was distinguished from God (*alif*) through the act of creation that introduced contingency and possibility (dot) into it. Through this lettrist analysis and the Akbarian notion of descent (*tanazzul*) and manifestation (*ẓuhūr*), Āmulī elucidates the Neoplatonic concept of emanation.

Within this framework, the act of creation is portrayed as a progression in which the letter *alif* descends from its transcendent realm and manifests itself as the letter *bāʾ*. Therefore, the letter *alif* encompasses two aspects. It refers to the first being in its abstraction (*tajarrud*) and absoluteness (*iṭlāq*), wherein it maintains its distinct *alif*-ness independent of other letters.[31] Nevertheless, from the perspective of descent (*tanazzul*) and manifestation (*ẓuhūr*), the letter

B. ʿUyūn al-Sūd, 2 vols. [Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1417/1997], 1: 193) which attributes it to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib with a slightly different wording: "If I wanted, I could load seventy camels with the secrets of *Fātiḥat al-kitāb*."

28. The immediate source for this hadith is Ibn al-ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (ed. ʿA. S. al-Manṣūb, 13 vols. [Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, al-Jumhūriyya al-Yamaniyya, 1431/2010], 1: 324). Earlier sources document a similar saying that could be the origin. For instance, the Sufi Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) asserts that Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) had stated, "Regarding the *bāʾ* of the *bi-smi llāh*: Through Allāh, all prophets emerged, and in him, they were annihilated"; al-Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*: *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿazīz*, ed. S. ʿUmrān, 2 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1421/2001), 1: 24.

29. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 865. For Ibn al-ʿArabī's and Abū Madyan's statement, see Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, 1: 324.

30. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 868.

31. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 873.

alif descends from its original realm and becomes manifested within each individual letter, which reflects the Neoplatonic conception of the world's creation via the first intellect down to the realms of minerals, animals, and humans. In this model, *alif*-ness (*alifiyya*), *bāʾ*-ness (*bāʾiyya*), and dot-ness (*nuqṭayya*) correspond to the absolute being, the first intellect, and the ontological contingency introduced into the universe through the descending of God/*alif* into the world.[32]

Āmulī also notes the omission of the letter *alif* in the prepositional phrase *bi-ism* within the basmala (as the alif of *ism* is technically elided and not written). He considers this additional evidence of the link between the letters *alif* and *bāʾ* and proposes that the latter assumes the position of the former and is intricately connected to it.[33] The reason for the dropping of the *alif*, as per Āmulī, is that the downside curving of the letter *bāʾ* represents its humility (*inkhifāḍ*), submissiveness (*tadhallul*), and dejection (*inkisār*) toward God, which is why this letter can serve as its replacement in the basmala.[34] However, while the letter *alif* is omitted in the basmala, there are similar instances where it is retained: Q 96:1 ("Read! In the name") or Q 87:1 ("Glorify the name").[35] He argues that the letter *alif* is kept in these instances because of the unique status of the divine name Allāh, since the omission of the *alif* is a specific exception that applies only when the name Allāh is used, not its synonymous names like *rabb*.[36]

3. THE SECOND ASPECT: ON THE DOT WRITTEN BENEATH THE LETTER *BĀʾ*

This section brings into sharper focus Āmulī's view on the dot of the letter *bāʾ*. The dot is the active agent that facilitates the transformation of the divine *alif* into the created *bāʾ* and enables the lettrist process of descent and manifestation that parallels its cosmological counterparts. As he writes, "The process of distinguishing the absolute real (*al-ḥaqq al-muṭlaq*), or the worshipped, into the conditioned creation (*al-khalq al-muqayyad*), or the worshipper, can only take place through the inclusion of the supplemented, ontological, subservient, and distinguishing dot (*al-nuqṭa al-taʿayyuniyya al-ʿabdiyya al-wujūdiyya al-iḍāfiyya*). This dot, which represents contingency and possibility, is intrinsic to the essence of the letter itself, serving as the embodiment of the first contingent being."[37] Therefore, the dot is a diacritical mark that plays a crucial role in enabling the appearance of other letters through the processes of supplementation and restriction.

Additionally, Āmulī explains, when the dot is removed from any letter, it reverts to its original *alif* form and merges with the divine. This is because the contingent dot (*al-nuqṭa al-imkāniyya*) is the sole distinction between God and all other beings. Therefore, anyone seeking to unite with the divine and attain oneness with God (*yaṣīr huwa huwa*) must let go of this dot. Once seekers completely annihilate the dot (*afnāha*), they become capable of

32. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 874. It is important to note that Āmulī's Neoplatonism is notably influenced by two primary sources. Firstly, Ibn al-ʿArabī's works, which played a significant role in disseminating Islamic Neoplatonism in al-Andalus and beyond, for which, see M. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Ismāʿīlī Tradition* (Brill, 2014). Secondly, Āmulī directly draws from the works of the semi-Ismaili group Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (fl. fourth/tenth century), serving as another key influence on his Neoplatonic thought. For example, see Āmulī, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār wa-manbaʿ al-anwār*, ed. H. Corbin and ʿU. I. Yaḥyā (Anjuman-i Īrānshināsī-i Farānsa va Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī va Farhangī, 1347*sh* [1969]), 233–35.

33. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 875.

34. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 876.

35. Respectively, اقْرَأْ باسْم, سَبِّح اسْمَ. The Quran translations are from *The Qurʾan*, tr. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), modified as needed.

36. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 877.

37. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 882.

experiencing the pinnacle of mystical attainment known as "annihilation in God and permanence in him (*al-fanāʾ fī Allāh wa-l-baqāʾ bihi*).[38] This stage represents a pivotal point that prophets, Imams, and saints transcend, establishing themselves as God's representatives on earth, which, as Āmulī states, is alluded to in the verse by the Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235): "And if you were to me but a lowly dot of the letter *bāʾ* / I would raise you to what you could not attain by your own means."[39] As Āmulī elaborates, this poem encapsulates the pinnacle stage of the dot-like existence. It signifies the journey toward attaining the profound humility represented by the dot beneath the letter *bāʾ*, which in turn enables the individual to ascend to the exalted state (*ṣirta marfūʿ*) symbolized by the letter *alif*. This progression accentuates the transformative path of spiritual elevation, where embracing profound humility becomes the key to reaching sublime heights.[40] Hence, in Āmulī's analysis, the dot symbolizes the stage of mystical annihilation (*fānāʾ*) within the Sufi tradition. It is important to note that this annihilation is not ontological (*al-fanāʾ fī al-aʿyān*), but rather epistemological (*al-fanāʾ fī al-ʿirfān*). It signifies "a state of complete annihilation in God, where nothing of the individual's egoistic self remains, and nothing can be added to or claimed by them. It indicates a state of utter dispossession and pure servanthood."[41]

Āmulī's analysis of the dot also carries a distinct Shiʿi perspective, which is particularly evident from a hadith attributed to the first Shiʿi Imam, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661): "I am the dot written beneath the letter *bāʾ*."[42] Āmulī acknowledges that certain Sufi masters ascribe this statement to Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/946), although he finds this attribution problematic:

> *Bāʾ* represents absolute prophecy (*al-nubuwwa al-muṭlaqa*), but the dot is allocated to absolute sainthood (*al-walāya al-muṭlaqa*), and al-Shiblī is not the absolute saint but a manifestation of its manifestations. But this speech, according to the consensus of the scholars, was uttered by the Commander of the Believers ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib on a minbar in Kufa, so the dot refers to absolute sainthood, *bāʾ* refers to absolute prophecy, and both together refer to apostleship (*risāla*), so such a speech could only be stated by ʿAlī.[43]

The dot hadith does not feature in any of the early hadith sources, and its rise to prominence seems to be rooted in the premodern mystical tradition, notably due to authors such as Rajab al-Bursī (d. ca. 813/1411) and Āmulī, who included it in their works and attributed it to ʿAlī.[44] This hadith also served as a polemical rebuttal to alternative interpretations presented by certain Sunni scholars. An intriguing example is Āmulī's contemporary, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. early ninth/fifteenth century), who also authored a commentary on the basmala. However, unlike Āmulī, al-Jīlī does not interpret it as an allusion to ʿAlī but rather to the divine essence (*dhāt Allāh*), which transcends human comprehension.[45] Āmulī's inclusion of the dot tradition is also a response aimed at polemicizing debates regarding the seal of sainthood, particularly directed toward Ibn al-ʿArabī and some of his followers, notably Dāwūd

38. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 883–84.
39. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 876, 886.
40. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 886.
41. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 886.
42. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 890.
43. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 890–91.
44. Al-Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī asrār Amīr al-Muʾminin*, ed. ʿA. Āshūr (Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 1422/2001), 31.
45. Al-Jīlī, *al-Kahf wa-l-raqīm fī sharḥ bism Allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, 4th ed. (Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1406/1985), 5.

al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350). Āmulī sharply criticizes the latter for not recognizing ʿAlī as the ultimate seal of sainthood.[46]

Thus, Āmulī considers the dot to symbolize the stage of sainthood, and he utilizes its distinctive diacritical significance to explicate the supremacy of sainthood over prophecy, a fundamental principle of the Akbarian tradition.[47] While *bāʾ* is utilized to clarify the Neoplatonic process of creation, its dot assumes significance within the context of Sufi annihilation and Shiʿi Imamate. This amalgamation of Sufi and mystical concepts such as sainthood and annihilation, along with the Shiʿi Imamate, demonstrates the complex interplay between these intellectual dimensions in Āmulī's works and his use of letter symbolism as a potent tool to convey these ideas.

4. THE THIRD ASPECT: ON THE LETTERS *SĪN* AND *MĪM*

The letters *sīn* and *mīm*, which form the second part of the basmala, are analyzed together by Āmulī as a pair. In his lettrist cosmology, the letter *sīn* holds the second position, symbolizing the universal soul (*al-nafs al-kulliyya*), which corresponds to the second cosmological entity in Neoplatonic philosophy. Similarly, the letter *mīm* signifies the universal nature (*al-ṭabīʿa al-kulliyya*) as the third cosmological entity. He also states that the tripartite arrangement of *alif*, *bāʾ*, and dot correlates with the three-layered planes of existence: the omnipotent world (*jabarūt*), the spiritual world (*malakūt*), and the material world (*mulk*). Similarly, the second tripartite group of the basmala, made up of the letters *bāʾ*, *sīn*, and *mīm*, aligns with these three levels of worldly ranks. The third tripartite group of the basmala, comprising *Allāh*, *al-raḥmān*, and *al-raḥīm*, also corresponds to these three cosmological domains.[48] The fuller list of these tripartite correspondences is found in Table 2.

Table 2

Jabarūt	*alif*	*bāʾ*	*Allāh*	Divine essence	Monotheism of essence (*al-tawḥīd al-dhātī*)	Unicity (*aḥadiyya*)
Malakūt	*bāʾ*	*sīn*	*al-Raḥmān*	Divine names	Monotheism of names (*al-tawḥīd al-asmāʾī*)	Oneness (*wāḥidiyya*)
Mulk	dot	*mīm*	*al-Raḥīm*	Divine actions	Monotheism of action (*al-tawḥīd al-fiʿlī*)[49]	Lordship (*rubūbiyya*)[50]

The model of correspondences in Table 2 lies at the heart of Āmulī's esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*), which harmonizes the scripture, cosmos, and the human body, or the Quran,

46. For this topic, see M. Rustom, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's Seal of Absolute *walāya*: A Shīʿī Response to Ibn ʿArabī," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 31.4 (2020): 407–23. Āmulī's criticism of al-Qayṣarī is rather harsh. Indeed, he renounces al-Qayṣarī's arguments about the seal of sainthood as a sectarian jealousy (*taʿṣṣub*), calling them out as "weaker than the spider's web (*awhan min bayt al-ʿankabūt*)"; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 358. For a recent study of Shiʿi–Sunni dynamics in Āmulī's works, see N. Boylston, "Qurʾanic Exegesis at the Confluence of Twelver Shiism and Sufism: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's *al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam*," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 23.1 (2021): 1–35.

47. See Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology," 181–91.

48. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 892.

49. For Āmulī's analysis of monotheism, see M. A. Mansouri, "The Sea and the Wave: A Preliminary Inquiry into Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's Criticism of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Ontology," *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 68 (2020): 75–101, at 83–86.

50. For these three aspects of the world, see Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 3: 1630; Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology," 184–85.

macrocosm, and microcosm.[51] Āmulī indeed constructs the three tripartite groups of the basmala, namely, *alif–bāʾ*–dot; *bāʾ–sīn–mīm*; *Allāh*, *al-raḥmān*, *al-raḥīm*, as parallel symbols of the cosmos from the highest realms to the lowest. These lettrist-cosmological correspondences sometimes change, which is particularly evident in his inquiry of the letter *bāʾ*. When it is counted as part of the first tripartite group, the letter *alif* corresponds to *jabarūt* and *aḥadiyya*, while *bāʾ* corresponds with *malakūt* and *wāḥidiyya*. However, when *bāʾ* is counted as part of the second tripartite group, it corresponds to *jabarūt* and *aḥadiyya*. He thus crafts a cosmic web of interconnectedness and reflections that are encapsulated by the letters of the basmala to explain the changing relationship between language, cosmology, and spirituality.

5. THE FOURTH ASPECT: ON ALLĀH

A substantial part of Haydar Āmulī's study of the basmala focuses on the word Allāh. In Islamic tradition, divine names, known as God's most beautiful names (*asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*), hold a place of exceptional status. The Quran affirms the significance of these names as well as their spiritual and theological implications: "The most beautiful names belong to God: use them to call on him and keep away from those who abuse them—they will be requited for what they do."[52] Narratives surrounding divine names in Islamic intellectual history are rather intricate. While Ibn al-ʿArabī singlehandedly centralized divine names in his cosmology, earlier Muslim philosophers, theologians, and Sufis also presented significant theories, particularly concerning God's essence and his attributes. A notable example is the Muslim theologian al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), who compiled a list that included names like Freedom (*ikhtiyār*) and God's Creative Power (*takwīn*), which are absent from Ibn al-ʿArabī's framework.[53] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) is another Muslim theologian who authored a distinct treatise on divine names. Representing the later theological tradition, al-Rāzī examines notions such as the distinctions between the name (*ism*) and the named (*musammā*), and the differences between God's essence, his names, and his attributes (*ṣifāt*). He also provides a comprehensive commentary on the ninety-nine names of God.[54]

In addition to Muslim theologians, Sufis such as al-Qushayrī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) provide comprehensive analyses of divine names.[55] However, as will be shortly explained, one encounters a systematic Neoplatonic account of creation and emanationism, alongside a distinctive theory of God's transcendence and immanence in the Akbarian narrative of divine names, and these two characteristics set this model apart from earlier Sufi and theological theories. This synthesis elevates the theory of divine names to a central tenet of this school. Generally, seven divine names hold a special status as the "imams of the divine names" (*aʾimmat al-asmāʾ*) in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought. These names act as just, dominant, and powerful rulers among all other divine names, governing them with fairness. The seven names are as follows: the Alive (*ḥayy*), the Knowledgeable (*ʿālim*), the Willing (*murīd*), the Powerful (*qādir*), the Generous (*jawād*), the Just (*muqsiṭ*), and the Speaker (*mutakallim*).[56] Ibn al-ʿArabī emphasizes that the name Allāh is "the foremost comprehensive name that

51. See Boylston, "Qurʾanic Exegesis," 16–23.

52. Q 7:180.

53. See U. Rudolph, "Ḥnafī Theological Tradition and Māturīdīsm," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. S. Schmidtke (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 280–96, at 289.

54. Ṭ. ʿA. Saʿd, ed., *Sharḥ asmā Allāh al-ḥusnā li-l-Rāzī* (Maktabat al-Azhariyya, 1396/1976).

55. Al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ maʿānī al-asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. B. ʿA. al-Jābī (Dār Ibn al-Ḥazm, 1424/2003); al-Qushayrī, *Sharḥ asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Ṭ. ʿA. Saʿd and S. Ḥ. M. Alī (Dār al-Ḥaram li-l-Turāth, 1422/2001).

56. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 899.

encompasses all other names" and serves as "a guiding pathway to the divine essence."[57] He writes,

> [This name Allāh] encompasses the essence of all names, and it signifies the divine essence itself. Thus, we must perceive it as transcendent, akin to the essence. This name encompasses all other divine names, so if we construe it to denote a specific state of existence (*kawn min al-akwān*), we do not grasp it fully, as we focus only on its most dominant meaning. Moreover, there exist other divine names, distinct from Allāh, that denote these particular states of being. We approach it from the perspective of the name [Allāh], which stands distinct from all others, and illuminate being through it to ensure that the sacred status of the name Allāh remains untouched. Once this concept is established and the encompassing name (*al-ism al-jāmiʿ*) ceases to be tied to any singular state of existence, it remains so until all realities are revealed. It is then that the sovereign (*sulṭān*) manifests his essence fully.[58]

The name Allāh holds a position of exaltation and shares the same level of transcendence (*tanzīh*) as the divine essence itself.[59] That is why, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, this particular divine name is not directly involved in the administrative and governing duties of the cosmos. Instead, these tasks are assigned to the seven leading divine names, which are themselves guided and governed by another divine name, Alive.[60]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's commentators also followed this model. For instance, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī authored a highly influential text in which he explains various meanings of the ninety-nine divine names. Employing the Akbarian framework of manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) and appearance (*tajallī*), he demonstrates how these names act as conduits through which the world was brought into existence. As he maintains, those who are spiritually attuned, known as the lords of hearts (*arbāb al-qulūb*) and companions of unveiling and witnessing (*aṣḥāb al-kashf wa-l-shuhūd*), have the capacity to comprehend these nuanced matters.[61] Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī is another authority in this context whose commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* played a crucial role in establishing Akbarian thought. In his commentary, he dedicates one of the twelve sections of his introduction to divine names and attributes.[62] Similarly to Kāshānī, al-Qayṣarī specifically examined these seven names.[63]

Āmulī adopts the general outline of this Akbarian model. He explains that an important distinction exists between divine names and conventional names, as divine names, unlike the latter, are intrinsically and completely identical with their objects of reference or the named entities (*musammā*), i.e., God.[64] However, the name Allāh stands alone in its significance among all divine names since it encompasses the entirety of the pure and transcendent

57. Ibn al-ʿArabī, "Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir," in *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-ʿArabī*, ed. H. S. Nyberg (E.J. Brill, 1919), 3–38 (Arabic), at 33; Engl. trans., P. B. Fenton and M. Gloton, "The Book of the Description of the Encompassing Circles," in *Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Element Books, 1993), 12–43, at 37. The English translation of the passage is, however, the author's own.

58. Ibn al-ʿArabī, "Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir," 33 (Engl. trans., 37).

59. For *tanzīh* in the Akbarian tradition and its similarities with Ismaili negative theology, see M. A. Mansouri, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 787/1385) and Ismailism," *Studia Islamica* 117.2 (2022): 171–229, at 195–217.

60. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Inshāʾ al-dawāʾir*, 25–32 (Arabic). For divine names in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought, see W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (SUNY Press, 1989), 33–75, 94–96, 369–72; W. C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (SUNY Press, 1998), xvi–xviii.

61. Al-Qūnawī, *Sharḥ asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*, ed. Q. al-Ṭihrānī (Dār wa-Maktabat al-Hilāl, 2008), 109.

62. Al-Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Ḥ. Ḥasanzāda Āmulī, 2 vols. (Būstān-i Kitāb-i Qum, 1382*sh* [1424]), 1: 61–80.

63. Al-Qayṣarī, *Sharḥ*, 66–69; Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. ʿA. Shāhīn, 2 vols. (Dār al-Manār, 1413/1992), 1: 58–60.

64. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 897.

divine essence (*al-dhāt al-muqaddasa al-munazzaha*) and cannot be attributed to anything other than God.[65] In contrast, other divine names such as the Knowledgeable (*ʿalīm*) or the Powerful (*qādir*) can be applied to other beings.[66] Āmulī weaves this analysis into his theory of esoteric interpretation, which uncovers the hidden correspondences between the Quran, the microcosm, and the macrocosm, and assigns a specific place to the names *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*:

> When God intended to commence his macrocosmic, microcosmic, and quranic books (*al-kitāb al-āfāqī wa-l-anfusī wa-l-qurʾānī*), he began them all with *bi-smi llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* or its parallel, as has been explained. The basmala commences with the word Allāh, which is the name of the divine essence (*ism al-dhāt*), necessitating its precedence over other names. I refer to the two books that the Quran encompasses formally and spiritually, both of which began with a complete (*tāmm*), universal (*kulliyya*), valid (*muʿtabar*), and noble (*sharīf*) word. In the former book, the macrocosmic book, it was the intellect, and in the latter, the microcosmic book, it was the human soul. These correspond with the divine names *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*, which are indeed identical. Similarly, the Quran begins with a noble and universal verse, which is the basmala. It encompasses them all, as we have explained, through a complete and noble word and a noble, elevated, and exalted name, which is the word Allāh.[67]

Just as any sultan or ruler would begin letters with the honorific titles most cherished to them, Āmulī contends, God likewise began his book with the greatest and most beloved name.[68] Thus, the name Allāh represents the commencement of creation, and signifies God's creative potency in shaping the universe; the name *al-raḥmān* symbolizes the capacity of created beings to receive divine emanations from the divine essence or the absolute emanator (*al-fayyāḍ al-muṭlaq*); and the name *al-raḥīm* represents the ultimate perfection of the world, which will be realized in the hereafter. Hence, there exists a salvific and redemptive transition from the celestial to the terrestrial and from the terrestrial to the ultimate culmination.[69]

Āmulī presents a detailed lettrist analysis of the constituent letters of the word Allāh as well. He acknowledges two scholarly perspectives regarding this word. The first camp counts four letters—*alif*, the first and second *lām*, and the *hāʾ*—as the constituting letters. The second camp, which Āmulī aligns with, expands the count to six letters—*alif*, the first and second *lām*, *alif*, *hāʾ*, and *wāw*.[70] Although Āmulī does not explain how he reached this model, we gain some insight from Muʾayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 690/1291), who offers a concise and detailed analysis of the various theories about the root of the word Allāh. As he summarizes the views of Muslim theologians, there are ten possible roots for this word, spanning from *aliha*, *ilāhiyyat*, or *ilāhat* to words that contain the letter *wāw*, such as *walaha*.[71] Thus, Āmulī's choice to include the letter *wāw* may be a reference to this tradition and an

65. Āmulī, *al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam*, 1: 232–37.

66. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 898.

67. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 901.

68. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2 :903–4. According to Āmulī, the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*) encompasses all the knowledge and realities that this "sultan" has written in his book or the world. They alone possess the capacity and ability to encode this letter for humanity and explain its deepest meanings; ibid., 2: 905–6. Shiʿi literature, for example, al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/902f.), includes hadith that confirm the idea that the Imams are the true and ultimate source of the knowledge of the Quran; al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt fī faḍāʾil āl Muḥammad*, ed. M. K. Bāghī al-Tabrīzī, 2nd ed. (Maktabat Āyat Allāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Marʿashī al-Najafī, 1404 [1984]), 212–16, 231.

69. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 902. The names *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* will be explained in detail in the next section.

70. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 907.

71. Al-Jandī, *Nafḥat al-rūḥ wa-tuḥfat al-futūḥ*, ed. N. M. Hiravī (Intishārāt-i Mavlā, 1362*sh* [1983]), 57–58.

inclusive approach to all possible letters that make up this divine name. Āmulī proposes two different ways to understand how these letters correspond with the cosmos (Table 3).

Table 3. The Correspondences between the Word Allāh and the World

alif	**First *lām***	**Second *lām***	***hamza***	***hāʾ***	***wāw***
Divine essence	Realm of oneness	*jabarūt*	*malakūt*	*mulk*	The Perfect Human or the encompassing kingdom (*kawn al-jāmiʿ*)
Divine essence/ unicity	Attribute of glory (*al-jalīla*)	Attributes of action	Divine essence as manifested in the creation	Majestic names (*al-asmāʾ al-jalāliyya*)	Beautiful names (*al-asmāʾ al-jamāliyya*)

The view that the word Allāh consists of six letters aligns with the six letters of *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*. Together, these three divine names form a total of eighteen letters, which carries a symbolic value.[72] From Āmulī's perspective, the number eighteen holds the same cosmological value as the number nineteen, which includes the addition of the human being. In other words, there are eighteen planes of existence from the first intellect down to the earth, and there are nineteen if we count human beings. These eighteen letters correspond with the nineteen letters of the basmala, as there is no distinction between these two numbers. Therefore, the basmala symbolizes the complete numerical expression of the cosmos, which will be further explored in the next section.

6. THE FIFTH ASPECT: ON *AL-RAḤMĀN* AND *AL-RAḤĪM*

Although Āmulī's approach to *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* aligns with the broader Akbarian framework, he specifically relies on the works of Kāshānī to explore their connection, in particular, *Kashf al-wujūh al-ghurr al-maʿānī* and *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*. According to Āmulī, *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* differ from Allāh significantly. While Allāh conveys God's transcendence and inaccessibility to the human mind, *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* are more tangible and comprehensible. The name *al-raḥmān* signifies the manifestation and channeling of God's mercy into the cosmos, representing its initiation; the name *al-raḥīm* represents the final destination and purpose of God's mercy. They symbolize the cycle of creation from its inception to its culmination.[73] They serve as conduits for all other divine names to manifest in the world and enable a continuous flow and perpetual presence of these names in every creation and encompass the boundless mercy and compassion that permeate the entire existence:

> When the sanctified and absolute essence descends from the realm of absoluteness and sanctity (*ḥaḍrat al-iṭlāq wa-l-taqaddus*) and undergoes the first process of conditioning and distinguishing through manifestation and multiplicity, it is referred to as the Merciful, human being, caliph, and intellect. This is because of the universal and absolute divine mercy, which flows toward everything deserving of it.[74] God designated the name *al-raḥmān* to follow the realm of unic-

72. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 908.
73. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 911.
74. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 921.

> ity (*al-ḥaḍra al-aḥadiyya*), which pertains to the name Allāh, and it belongs to the realm of the unity of names (*al-ḥaḍra al-wāḥidiyya al-asmāʾiyya*). Subsequently, the realm of action, lordship, and return (*al-ḥaḍra al-rubūbiyya al-maʿādiyya*) emerges, which is associated with the name *al-raḥīm* and represents its manifestation. Intervention and possession within this realm are attributed to this name. Consequently, the divine command descends from the realm of the unity of the essence to the realm of the attributes of *al-raḥmān*, and further to the realm of the actions of *al-raḥīm*. Existence is organized around these three stages of descent, also referred to as the Almighty Real (*ḥaqq*), the macrocosmic human being (*al-insān al-kabīr*), and the microcosmic human being (*al-insān al-ṣaghīr*). These stages are encapsulated within the basmala and its meanings. A wise individual contemplates the grandeur of the basmala, the wisdom inherent in its structure and composition, and the hidden secrets that lie beneath it.[75]

As Āmulī explains, the name *al-raḥmān* signifies the first process of divine conditioning and distinguishing, and the name *al-raḥīm* represents its manifestation and intervention within this realm. Consequently, being descends through these stages, a process encapsulated within the basmala, where each name plays a specific role in the descent from divine essence to worldly actions. In this manner, while Allāh remains transcendent and uninvolved in the direct management of the cosmos, *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* serve as intermediaries between the divine and the created.

The concept of the breath of the Merciful or *nafas al-raḥmān* particularly demonstrates the unique creating power of this name. It played a major role in the Akbarian tradition, in that, as William Chittick writes, "the All-Merciful's exhalation of His Breath is equivalent to the bestowal of existence (*ījād*). [. . .] The All-Merciful [. . .] feels distress (*kurbah*) within Himself [. . .]. So God 'exhales' and relieves His distress. He deploys His Breath and the cosmos is born."[76] Āmulī adheres to this framework:

> Know that unveiling (*kashf*), conventionally, denotes the lifting of a veil (*ḥijāb*), akin to when it is said that a woman unveils her face, which indicates the removal of a facial covering. However, colloquially, this term signifies an awareness of what lies beyond the veil, encompassing invisible meanings and genuine matters (*maʿānī al-ghaybiyya wa-l-umūr al-ḥaqīqiyya*), whether from ontological or intuitive standpoints (*shuhūd*). It may also pertain to formal or spiritual realms. By formal (*ṣūrī*), I refer to what the five senses perceive in the imaginal world (*ʿālam al-mithāl*), which is achievable through observation, such as the embodiment of spiritual forms or the manifestation of spiritual entities to individuals. Similarly, one may acquire this intuitive knowledge through hearing (*samāʿ*), like the Prophet's reception of divine revelation [. . .]. Occasionally, unveiling occurs through olfactory sensations (*istinshāq*), like sensing the caress of divine winds (*al-nafaḥāt al-ilāhiyya*) or the fragrant of lordship (*fawḥāt al-rubūbiyya*). The Prophet, peace be upon him, cautioned: "Take heed, divine winds sweep through your days. Seize their fleeting presence," and also remarked, "I catch the fragrance of the Merciful drifting from Yemen."[77]

Although Ibn al-ʿArabī popularized the concept of the breath of the Merciful in the Sufi and mystical circles of premodern Islam, the prophetic hadith regarding Yemen can be traced back to earlier sources. In particular, it appears in Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's (d. 241/855) *Musnad* and Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad Ṭabarānī's (d. 360/971) *Musnad al-shāmīyyīn*, both of which narrate the hadith on the authority of the Prophet's companion Abū Hurayra (d. ca. 57/678).[78] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), the Muslim exegete who lived

75. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 922.

76. William C. Chittick, "Ibn ʿArabī and His School," in *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, ed. S. H. Nasr (Crossroad, 1991), 49–79, at 59.

77. Āmulī, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār*, ed. Corbin and Yaḥyā, 462.

78. Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, ed. Sh. al-Arnaʾūṭ et al., 50 vols. (Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1416–21/1995–2001), 16:

during the same period as Ibn al-ʿArabī, offers an intriguing commentary on this hadith. He suggests that the Prophet's mention of Yemen could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it may allude to a future alleviation of sorrow (*faraj*) through the widespread conversion of his adversaries to Islam. Secondly, it could signify how God relieved the Prophet of anguish and distress (*karb*) through the people of Yemen or the Helpers (*anṣār*).[79] In the Akbarian narrative, the distress and anguish experienced by the Prophet are reimagined as divine stress, which was alleviated by the act of creating the cosmos and imbuing it with existence. Āmulī particularly transforms the Prophet's ability to perceive the fragrance of relief forthcoming from Yemen to an allegory of Sufis' capacity to discern the breath of the Merciful through the process of unveiling, which grants them access to the concealed realities of the cosmos.

Āmulī also explains that the act of uttering words and forming oral speech requires the process of breathing. One should first breathe properly to produce sound, so the air that is exhaled transforms into letters, words, and speech. In a similar manner, God created the world by exhaling divine breath that appeared as letters and words, which gave rise to the entire cosmos. This analogy stresses the intimate connection between the merciful act of divine breathing and creation, and the power and significance of language in understanding the nature of existence. The divine breath gives life, and language allows us to grasp the essence of creation.[80] Additionally, Āmulī introduces the first intellect and the universal soul as the manifestations of *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm*, and these names are also associated with other realities, such as the footstool (*kursī*) and the throne (*ʿarsh*), or the ninth and eighth spheres, as portrayed in Table 4.[81]

Table 4

al-raḥmān	*al-raḥīm*	*al-razzāq*	*al-ʿalīm*	*al-qahhār*	*al-nūr*	*al-muṣawwar*	*al-bārī*	*al-khāliq*
Ninth Sphere	Eighth sphere	Seventh sphere	Sixth sphere	Fifth sphere	Fourth sphere	Third sphere	Second sphere	First sphere

Āmulī also links the name *al-raḥmān* with the outward aspects (*ẓāhir*) of the universe. This name holds particular significance for the prophets, as they are entrusted with receiving exoteric revelations from the first intellect. On the other hand, the name *al-raḥīm* pertains to the inward aspects (*bāṭin*) of the universe. It is through this name that saints and Imams receive esoteric inspirations from the universal soul. Furthermore, Āmulī explains that the name *al-raḥmān* is intricately connected to *al-insān al-kabīr* and the name *al-raḥīm* to *al-insān al-ṣaghīr*, making them equally significant in expressing both the macrocosm and the microcosm. This correlation emphasizes the interplay between individual human beings and the vast cosmos, and symbolizes unity and harmony between the inner and outer worlds.[82] This narrative represents the doctrine of the three books in Āmulī's writings, where the basmala, which symbolizes the Quran, aligns with the book of the cosmos, which encompasses the microcosm and macrocosm, thereby rendering the entire world as the inscription and divine book of God. This doctrine of three books is particularly evident in Āmulī's cri-

576–77; al-Ṭabarānī, *Musnad al-shāmīyyīn*, ed. Ḥ. ʿA. al-Salafī, 4 vols. (Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1409/1989), 2: 149.

79. Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, ed. K. M. al-Kharrāṭ and M. Ḥabbūsh, 24 vols. (Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1427/2006), 22: 540.

80. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 913.

81. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 912.

82. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 914–15.

tique of Kāshānī, who interpreted the occult and enigmatic texts known as *Jafr* and *Jāmiʿa* as referring to the universal intellect (*al-ʿaql al-kull*) and the universal soul (*al-nafs al-kull*). Āmulī contends that this interpretation is overly simplistic, as these two texts correspond not to these elevated realms of existence but to the macrocosmic book of the universe (*al-kitāb al-kabīr al-āfāqī*) and the microcosmic book of human souls (*al-kitāb al-ṣaghīr al-anfusī*). In this context, Āmulī's analysis of these two divine names is an integral component of his belief that the microcosm, the macrocosm, and the Quran are the three occult and mysterious books of God.[83]

As observed, Āmulī's analysis of the basmala begins with the smallest linguistic elements and progresses to larger units: from *alif*, *bāʾ*, dot to the letters forming *bi-smi*, to the words *Allāh*, *al-raḥmān*, and *al-raḥīm*: three distinct groups. This comprehensive structure encompasses the entire cosmos, spanning from the highest to the lowest and from the beginning to the end. The basmala, thus, derives its significance from its configuration, wherein all linguistic elements, such as letters, diacritical marks, words, phrases, their numerical values, or even morphology, symbolize concealed and mystical meanings.

7. THE SIXTH ASPECT: ON CORRESPONDENCE (*TAṬBĪQ*) BETWEEN THE LETTERS OF THE BASMALA AND THE LETTERS OF THE WORLD

In the concluding section of his analysis of the basmala, Āmulī focuses on clarifying the correspondences between its linguistic letters and the cosmological letters of the universe. He acknowledges that he has previously addressed this matter in the introduction of his commentary, so he avoids reiterating all those points in the final section.[84] He must be referring to the last three sections of "the preludes" (*tamhīdāt*) where he examines diverse meanings associated with the number eighteen and comprehensively analyzes this numerical symbolism.[85] As mentioned, he holds the belief that both the number eighteen and the number nineteen carry the same cosmological significance. The only distinction between them lies in the inclusion or exclusion of the human being within the cosmological hierarchy.[86] Hence, the three tripartite groups of the basmala amount to the number eighteen, while still maintaining correspondence with the nineteen letters of the basmala and the nineteen ranks of the cosmos. Throughout his analysis, he establishes various connections between the nineteen letters of the basmala and other cosmological, physical, spiritual, and lettrist realities, which I outline in Table 5 (for these correspondences, see also Tasbihi, "Visionary Perceptions," 63–65).

The list of these correspondences is not meant to be exhaustive, as Āmulī applies the numbers seven, twelve, and nineteen to a wide range of phenomena.[87] They demonstrate his distinctive lettrist model, which unveils a multitude of correspondences between letters, diacritical marks, vowels, words, and all linguistic components, as well as physical, spiritual, and cosmological realities. Notably, throughout his works Āmulī consistently cites two verses of the Quran to convey the symbolic significance of the number nineteen and interpret them in conjunction with each other. The first verse is the basmala, which has been the focal point of analysis in this paper. The second is Q 74:30 and its reference to "the nineteen

83. Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology," 176–80.
84. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 923.
85. Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 297–347; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 457–554.
86. Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 152; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 61.
87. For an example, see Mansouri, "*Walāya* between Lettrism and Astrology," 192–93.

Table 5

Basmala Letters	Macrocosmic Counterparts (Physical World)	Prophets and Imams (Spiritual World)[a]	Arabic Letters[b]
bāʾ	first intellect	Muhammad	*alif*
sīn	universal soul	Adam	*ḥāʾ*
mīm	throne	Noah	*dāl*
alif	footstool	Abraham	*raʾ*
lām	Saturn	David	*sīn*
lām	Jupiter	Moses	*ṣād*
hāʾ	Mars	Jesus	*ṭāʾ*
alif	sun	ʿAl ibn Abī Ṭālib	*ʿayn*
lām	Venus	Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī	*kāf*
rāʾ	Mercury	Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī	*lām*
ḥāʾ	Moon	ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn	*mīm*
mīm	fire	Muḥammad al-Bāqir	*hāʾ*
nūn	air	Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq	*wāw*
alif	water	Mūsā al-Kāẓim	*yāʾ*
lām	Earth	ʿAlī al-Riḍā	single letters
rāʾ	minerals	Muḥammad al-Jawād	biliteral words
ḥāʾ	plants	ʿAlī al-Naqī	triliteral words
yāʾ	animals	al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī	quadrilateral words
mīm	humans	al-Mahdī[c]	quintiliteral words[d]

a. Āmulī regards both the manifestations of these luminaries in the human body and their spiritual realities (*ḥaqīqa wa-l-ṣūrat al-jasadiyy*a) as the counterparts of the basmala letters.
b. Āmulī does not explicitly mention the letters of this particular column, nor does he clarify how they connect to the rest of his model. But he states that the Arabic letters add up to nineteen if one counts the undotted letters (which I note in the table) and add them to single, biliteral, triliteral, quadrilateral, and quintiliteral words.
c. These correspondences are only found in Āmulī's introduction of *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 313–14; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 479–80. Also, every one of these seven prophets has twelve legatees (*waṣī*, pl. *awṣiyāʾ*). For the full list of their names, see Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 156–57; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 227–30.
d. Henry Corbin maintains that they refer to *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿa*; Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, 89.

guardians of hell." The link between these two is made clear in the hadith attributed to the Prophet, which Āmulī also cites.[88]

Viewed in this way, the nineteen letters of the basmala should be regarded as symbolic references to the nineteen angels of punishment, even though this correlation may appear peculiar and unconventional. However, as Āmulī explains, these angels represent the veils (*ḥijāb*) that exist between God and the world. In this context, the connection between the basmala and the angels of punishment serves as a metaphorical representation of the spiritual

88. Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 2: 857; and see above, n. 21.

barriers that separate humanity from the divine realm.[89] Indeed, these veils, or the angels of hell, are nothing but the cosmological hierarchies that segregate the divine and the sacred from the created and the profane.[90] This is why each letter of the basmala is a safeguard, which shields humans from one of these dividing veils and tormenting angels, and draws souls nearer to the concealed *alif* at the start of the phrase, which symbolizes God. The ultimate objective is to reach the sacred dot, thereby experiencing mystical annihilation and attaining everlasting existence in the presence of the divine. This lettrist journey unfolds as a movement from unity to multiplicity, and vice versa, and encompasses the intricate dynamics of spiritual realization.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Āmulī's reading of the basmala is a useful example of his intellectual model. He synthesized diverse strands of thought and merged them into a coherent and unified system of thinking. Āmulī's basmala analysis engaged with the lettrist qualities inherent in Arabic language, and he perceives them as reflective mirrors capable of establishing endless correspondences with physical, spiritual, and cosmological realities. This narrative is particularly significant for our understanding of the emerging academic studies of lettrism. As demonstrated, far from being limited to the mystical or esoteric power of individual letters, Āmulī's work reveals lettrism as a holistic framework, which includes not merely letters, but the totality of language—its sounds, diacritical marks, numerical properties, morphological shapes, and grammatical structures. Lettrism, as evidenced by this case study, demands a broader scholarly approach that acknowledges its ability to illuminate the complex connections between language, thought, and the cosmos.

Furthermore, Āmulī's analysis represents his universalizing model of thought. He transforms the basmala from a simple formula with diverse *bāṭinī* meanings, an approach common to earlier Sufis like al-Qushayrī and Maybudī, into a lettrist construct of the cosmic design. By doing so, he crafts a quranic blueprint to express the Neoplatonic and emanationist process of creation—from the divine realm to the physical world, and from the past to the future. The basmala is a prime example of Āmulī's inclusive, expansive, and universal model of thought, and demonstrates how he reinterprets and reimagines Islamic ideas and practices. In this light, Āmulī's ambitious project, often simplistically viewed as a Shiʿi reading of Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas, deserves broader contextualization. It aligns with similar intellectual models that aimed at harnessing science, magic, and monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) to decode the cosmos, which reached their zenith in the early modern Islamicate world.[91]

As Āmulī's analysis of the basmala demonstrates, he did not merely Shiʿitize Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings but systematized, organized, structured, and universalized them into a cohesive monotheistic and monist intellectual framework.[92] As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Āmulī did not strictly adhere to Ibn al-ʿArabī's ontological ideas; instead, he suggested corrections and criticisms to certain expressions he found problematic. In this way, he was more Akbarian than Ibn al-ʿArabī himself. Thus, Āmulī's approach was not merely

89. Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 318, 322; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 491, 499.

90. Āmulī, *al-Muqaddimāt*, ed. Yaḥyā and Corbin, 324; Āmulī, *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. Bīdārfar, 1: 858.

91. In addition to other works of Melvin-Koushki cited in the paper, see M. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest for a Universal Science: The Occult Philosophy of Ṣāʾin al-Dīn Turka Iṣfahānī (1369–1432) and Intellectual Millenarianism in Early Timurid Iran" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2012).

92. For this aspect, see Mansouri, "Casket of Light."

an extension of Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought but an active engagement that sought to refine and enhance it.[93]

In Āmulī's commentary on the basmala, one encounters a wide range of theosophical notions such as the dynamics of divinity and creation, Neoplatonic cosmology, and the microcosm-macrocosm analogy. These elements are also characteristic of the lettrism of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ibn Masarra. But given that Āmulī regarded his basmala commentary as unique, at least among other Akbarian commentators, a detailed comparative study is necessary to explain the points of divergence and convergence between his formulations and those of his predecessors. Such a study would shed light on the innovative aspects of his thought and how he diverged from or built upon earlier lettrist traditions.

Āmulī's analysis also has clear relevance for Islamic ideas and practices. According to this interpretation, with every utterance of the basmala a believer embarks on a cosmic reflection and a transcendent expedition, traversing from the celestial realm to the terrestrial realm, and from the past to the future of the universe. Thus, when Muslims recite the nineteen letters that constitute this quranic verse, they invoke the nineteen layers of existence, and transcend them. These celestial layers function as veils that separate individuals from their ontological homeland, or God's presence. They act as the guardians of hell and perpetuate eternal torment by keeping people separated from their ultimate spiritual destination. However, in this journey encapsulated within the basmala, believers can transcend these tormenting angels by traversing the threshold of *fanāʾ*, which represents the dot-like annihilation of the self, and attain access to the eternal realm of *baqāʾ*, or the *alif*-like state of everlasting existence.

93. Mansouri, "Sea and the Wave."