

RECOGNIZING RECOGNITION: MA'RIFA IN SUFI THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the Arabic noun *ma'rifa* as employed in a range of Arabic and Persian Sufi texts. After unpacking the semantics of the '-r-f' root in the Qur'ān and ḥadīth literature and juxtaposing *ma'rifa* with 'ilm, the piece seeks to demonstrate how Sufi authors specifically conceived of *ma'rifa* as a type of recognition of oneself and of God. This recognition is activated by the practice of *dhikr* or the remembrance of God, which in the end leads the recognizer to self-forgetting, perplexity, and bewilderment.

INTRODUCTION

Ma'rifa is a concept of central importance in Islamic thought. It appears variously in different intellectual disciplines such as ḥadīth, legal theory, theology, philosophy, and Sufism. In the secondary literature *ma'rifa* features most prominently in scholarship on Sufism. However, scholars have always been at odds when it comes to rendering the term into English. This is why it is variously translated as 'knowledge', 'gnosis', 'esoteric knowledge', 'experiential knowledge', 'mystical knowledge', 'cognition', and even 'unknowing'.¹ The same applies to its related

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¹ See, respectively, Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'The notion and significance of *ma'rifa* in Sufism', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 13/2 (2002): 155–81; Mohammed Rustom, 'Forms of gnosis in Sulamī's Sufi exegesis of the *Fātiha*', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 16/4 (2005): 327–44; Leonard Lewisohn (ed. and transl.), *Esoteric Traditions in Islamic Thought: An Anthology of Texts on Esoteric*

noun *‘irfan*, which eventually replaced *taṣawwuf* or ‘Sufism’ in eleventh/seventeenth-century Iran.² Advancing a recent argument to the effect that *ma‘rifa* is best translated as ‘recognition’,³ this article attempts to unearth the semantic range of the term by first tracing its presence in Islam’s major scriptural sources, juxtaposing it with the pervasive Arabic noun *‘ilm* (knowledge), and then examining how *ma‘rifa* figures in a wide variety of premodern Islamic texts in general, and Sufi texts in particular. It then shows how Sufi authors uniquely conceived of *ma‘rifa* as an act of recovering a knowledge that was previously theirs (akin to Plato’s doctrine of *anamnesis*), primarily through discerning God’s signs (*āyāt*). The fundamental practice of *dhikr* (the remembrance of God) emerges in texts that delve into the logic underlying *ma‘rifa* as essential to cultivating self-recognition and the recognition of God, leading the recognizer ultimately to a kind of forgetting and even an un-recognizing.

SCRIPTURE

The Arabic term *ma‘rifa* derives from the ‘-r-f root, which denotes the act of recognizing. This is indeed the predominant sense of ‘-r-f in its

Knowledge and Gnosis in Islam (London: Oneworld, 2024); Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Roger Arnaldez, art. s.v. ‘Ma‘rifa’ in *EI*²; John Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004); Seema Golestaneh, *Unknowing and the Everyday: Sufism and Knowledge in Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

² Ata Anzali, ‘Mysticism’ in *Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017); Seyed Amir Hossein Asghari, *Sufism and Philosophy in the Contemporary Shia Seminary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025). Treatments of ‘*irfan*’ or ‘philosophical Sufism’ can be found in Mukhtar H. Ali, *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-‘Arabī* (London: Routledge, 2022); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 209–34; id., *What Is Metaphysics? Ruminations on Principal Knowledge and Some of Its Applications* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2025); Oludamini Ogunnaike, ‘Philosophical Sufism in the Sokoto caliphate: the case of Shaykh Dan Tafa’ in Ousmane Kane (ed.), *Islamic Scholarship in Africa: New Directions and Global Contexts* (Woodridge: James Currey, 2021), 136–68; Mohammed Rustom, ‘Philosophical Sufism’ in Richard C. Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 399–411. Cf. Gerhard Böwering, art. s.v. ‘*Erfān*’ in *EIr*.

³ William C. Chittick and Mohammed Rustom, art. s.v. ‘Recognition (*ma‘rifa*)’ in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/>.

more than 70 appearances (primarily in verbal form) throughout the Qur'ān, although *ma'rifa* is not one of them.⁴ Needless to say, the Islamic tradition's use of *ma'rifa* is informed by the Qur'ān's wider perspective and presentation of *'-r-f* in its many forms. Juxtaposed to *'-r-f* is the *n-k-r* root, which appears in various forms 37 times in the Qur'ān. If verbs and nouns that come from *'-r-f* have to do with recognition and recognizing, those that come from *n-k-r* have to do with failing to recognize, being unaware of, and, by extension, denying and rejecting.

Words and nouns that stem from the *'-l-m* root, which primarily has to do with knowing and learning, appear over 850 times throughout the Qur'ān, giving it a much wider scope than *'-r-f*; likewise, the *j-h-l* root, which denotes ignorance and unawareness, is more general than *n-k-r*, although it appears less frequently in the Qur'ān. There are nevertheless important overlaps particularly between the Qur'ān's usage of *'-r-f* and *'-l-m* to merit *ma'rifa*'s often being juxtaposed and even identified with *'ilm* by Muslim thinkers from a wide range of disciplines.

Works in Persian render *ma'rifa* by its equivalent in that language, namely *shinākhtan*.⁵ With respect to the Qur'ān, this is best illustrated in the Persian Qur'ān commentary by Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī (d. *ca.* 520/1126), who in his Persian translation of the Qur'ān (which accounts for the first third of his commentary) consistently translates words that come from the *'-r-f* root with different forms of *shinākhtan* or 'recognition'.⁶

The reason 'recognition' accurately conveys what is connoted by *'-r-f* is the close association between a previous acquaintance and the formal attributes that activate re-acquaintance or 'recognition'. And this is the

⁴ Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu'jam al-mufabras li-alfāz al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 1988), art. s.v. *'-r-f*.

⁵ William C. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Writings of Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), *passim*; 'Alī Akbar Dihkhudā, *Lughat-nāma*, art. s.v. *'ma'rifat*, <https://dehkhoda.ut.ac.ir/en/dictionary>; Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Qudāt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2023), *passim*; Ja'far Sajjādī, *Farhang-i istilāhāt va ta'bīrāt-i 'irfānī* (Tehran: Tahūrī, 1991), 730–2.

⁶ See, for example, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī, *Kashf al-asrār wa-'uddat al-abrār* (ed. 'Alī Asghar Hikmat; Tehran: Dānishgāh, 10 vols., 1331–9/1952–60), i. 270, viii. 79, x. 411. An important study of this monumental *tafsīr* can be found in Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybūdī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006). A very valuable partial translation of it is also available: *The Unveiling of the Mysteries and the Provision of the Pious* (transl. William C. Chittick; Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015).

dominant sense in which ‘-r-f is employed throughout the Qur’ān: the one doing the act of recognition encounters something which has features that then trigger his prior familiarity with or knowledge of that thing.

We therefore have several Qur’ānic verses that relate the act of recognition on the part of the Jews and the Christians, who recognize the Qur’ān because of their knowledge of revelation (see Q. 2:89; 2:146; 5:83; see also 6:20). Thus, in Q. 5:83 the Christians recognize the Qur’ān and weep over the truth contained therein. Another fine example of this kind of recognition is Q. 2:89: *When there came to them that which they recognized, they disbelieved in it.* The context of this verse has to do with the Jews of Madina and their rejection of the Prophet Muḥammad when he came to them. *That which they recognized* is explained by the well-known philosopher and Qur’ānic exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) to be the general characteristics of a true prophet with which the Jews had been previously acquainted.⁷

Other common Qur’ānic terms derived from the ‘-r-f root convey senses of customary practice (Q. 77:1), mutual recognition (Q. 10:45; 49:13), and acknowledging sins (Q. 9:102; 40:11; 67:11). We also get a better sense of recognition as featured in the Qur’ān when ‘-r-f is contrasted with *n-k-r*. When they are in their verbal form the juxtaposition is between recognition/failing and recognizing/rejecting. Thus, Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they are *unaware of him* (Q. 12:58), and God’s blessings are recognized by human beings who then reject them (Q. 16:83).⁸

As nouns, the common pairing is between *ma’rūf* and *munkar*. The former appears mostly in legal contexts and more often than not denotes what is recognized as a correct, socially acceptable, dignified, and customary practice (Q. 2:178; 2:240–1; 2:234; 4:114; 24:53; 31:15; 33:6; 65:2; etc.).⁹ The term can also signify something like moderation (Q. 4:6). *Munkar*, by contrast, means something like ‘strange’, ‘abhorrent’, or ‘not-recognized’, that is, socially and/or by Islamic law (Q. 3:104; 3:114; 7:199; etc.).¹⁰ In one verse, the verb to recognize is linked to

⁷ See the commentary on this verse in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 43.

⁸ One may also profitably consult the perceptive comments in Philip F. Kennedy, *Recognition in the Arabic Narrative Tradition: Discovery, Deliverance and Delusion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 50–1.

⁹ See also Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 213–15.

¹⁰ See also *ibid.*, 216.

those who recognize the *munkar* on the faces of those who reject God's signs (Q. 22:72). And in another instance, the failure to recognize the messengers sent by God results in or is the cause of *munkar* (Q. 23:69).

The hypocrites command the not-recognized and forbid the recognized, which leads them to be forgetful of God (Q. 9:67). They stand in stark contrast to the Prophet, who commands the recognized and forbids the not-recognized (Q. 7:157; 31:17), as well as the faithful, who command the recognized and forbid the not-recognized, pray, pay the alms tax, follow the Prophet, and are thereby recipients of God's mercy (Q. 9:71; see also 9:112; 22:41).

In a cluster of verses, the Qur'ān identifies the attributes or characteristics that signal recognition as *sīmā* or 'marks' (see Q. 2:273; 7:46; 7:48; 47:30; 55:41). Recognition can be activated by a specific mark, such as the luminous joy (*nadrat al-na'im*) that will be visible on the faces of the people in Paradise (Q. 83:24). Or it can be activated by God Himself (Q. 47:6), who will cause those in Paradise to 'recognize' their new dwellings because of their resemblances to but superiority over their dwellings on earth.¹¹

There are three other key Qur'ānic verses that are widely understood by authors in the Islamic intellectual tradition to be references to recognition. The first of these is Q. 51:56, wherein God says, *I created not Jinn and man but to worship Me*. The famous Prophetic Companion and major early expositor of the Qur'ān Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/688) explains that *to worship Me* (*li-ya'budūn*) means 'to recognize Me'.¹² The second verse is Q. 6:91 (also 22:74 and 39:67): *They did not measure God with the rightful due of His measure*. The measuring (*qadr*) in question is commonly understood to mean 'recognition'.¹³

The third verse is Q. 7:172, which recounts the primordial covenant taken between God and human beings before they were brought to earth: *And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness against their own souls: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes indeed, we bear witness.'* The fact that we can be made to recall our Paradisal state implies that we had experienced it aforetime. This is where the important connection between recognition and remembrance comes to the forefront, particularly in

¹¹ See in this regard the Prophetic saying in Nasr *et al.*, *Study Quran*, 1237.

¹² Ibid., 1280; Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma' fī al-taṣawwuf* (ed. R. A. Nicholson; Leiden: Brill, 1914), 40.

¹³ Abū al-Hasan al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism, Black and White: A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Bayād wa-l-sawād by Abū l-Hasan al-Sīrjānī* (d. ca. 470/1077) (ed. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 62; Maybudi, *Unveiling of the Mysteries*, 509; Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 156.

Q. 27:93, which speaks of recognizing God's signs (*āyāt*): *He will show you His signs, and you will surely recognize them.* This one instance in which recognition is linked to God's signs is significant as these signs, which people will find *in the horizons and in their souls* (Q. 41:53), can only be recognized if they had been previously known.¹⁴

In *hadīth* literature, the '*-r-f*' root normally has the sense of 'recognition', and it is common to see scholars of *hadīth* employ verbal forms from this root to indicate whether or not they recognize a certain *hadīth*. Recognition not only pertains to reporters who discuss narrations that convey the statements and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, but also to the language of the *hadīth* compilers themselves. For example, in the introduction to his major *hadīth* collection, Muslim b. al-Hajjāj al-Nīsābūrī (d. 261/875) distinguishes between the elect (*khaṣṣat al-nās*) and the masses ('*awāmm al-nās*) when it comes to benefiting from the Prophetic traditions that are recorded in his book. The masses are unaware of this science and fall short in the little that they do know of it, whereas the elect are always in search of increasing their knowledge and awareness of it. Muslim says that what the elect have with respect to the technicalities of the science of the Prophetic traditions is 'some wakefulness (*tayaqquz*) and recognition (*ma'rifa*)', which is why he also refers to them as the 'folk of wakefulness and recognition'.¹⁵

Likewise, it is clear that Muhammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) understands *ma'rifa* to mean recognition or recognizing in his major *hadīth* collection. One of its books is dedicated to the superiority of the Night of Measuring Out (*laylat al-qadr*) in the month of Ramadan, and has a section entitled 'The Removal of Recognition of the Night of Measuring Out' (*raf' ma'rifat laylat al-qadr*). There the Prophet says that the exact time of the occurrence of this auspicious night during one Ramadan had been taken away from his Companions on account of two people reviling one another.¹⁶

In one famous narration that describes the Prophet Muhammad's physical features and way of being, it is said that 'Whoever came to recognize him (*man khālaṭaḥu ma'rifat*^{an}) would fall in love with

¹⁴ As we will see later, implied here is the intimate connection between recognition and the remembrance of God.

¹⁵ Muslim, *Šahīh*, k. [1] *Muqaddima*. The *hadīths* cited and referred to in these notes were read in the *Jam' jawāmi'* *al-ahādīth wa-l-asānīd wa-maknāz al-sihāh wa-l-sunan wa-l-masānīd* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: *Jam'iyyat al-Maknāz al-Islāmī*, 19 vols., 2000). Muslim's *Šahīh* is in vol. 4 of this compendium; Bukhārī's *Šahīh*, vol. 2; al-Tirmidhī's *Sunan*, vol. 6; Ibn Māja's *Sunan*, vol. 8; and Ahmad b. Hanbal's *Musnād*, vol. 12.

¹⁶ Bukhārī, *Šahīh*, k. [32] *Faḍl laylat al-qadr*, b. [4] *raf' ma'rifat laylat al-qadr li-talāḥī al-nās*.

him'.¹⁷ The Prophet himself employs the term *ma'rifa* to mean recognition in a variety of contexts dealing with law and theology.¹⁸ Concerning the latter, he explains that *īmān* (faith) is a kind of *ma'rifa*: 'Faith is recognizing in the heart, voicing with the tongue, and activity with the limbs'.¹⁹

A well-known *ḥadīth* records the Prophet as having described himself as the one who recognizes God (*a'raf*) more than anyone else.²⁰ Employing a verb from the '-r-f root, the Prophet also speaks of his recognizing the jealousy (*ghayra*) of one of his Companions,²¹ and in another report he describes an encounter between a believer and God in the afterlife wherein the believer recognizes his sins and is then forgiven for them.²²

In a *ḥadīth* concerning the afterlife that has puzzled many authors, the Prophet speaks of God disclosing Himself to His servants. They, in failing to recognize ('arafū) Him in the forms in which He appears, deny and reject Him (*ankarū*). This continues to happen until God appears to these servants in a form that they can recognize, at which time they acknowledge Him.²³

It is also important to note that some Prophetic sayings employ the term 'ilm but it has been understood by authors in the tradition to mean *ma'rifa*. For example, the Prophet's mention of knowledge ('ilm) in his famous statement 'The quest for knowledge is obligatory upon every believer' has often been seen as a reference to the recognition (*ma'rifa*) of the faults of one's soul and of one's incoming thoughts.²⁴

¹⁷ Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, k. [45] *al-Manāqib 'an Rasūl Allāh*, b. [8] *mā jā'a fī ṣifat al-Nabī*.

¹⁸ For the former, see, for example, *ibid.*, k. [7] *al-Nikāh 'an Rasūl Allāh*, b. [28] *mā jā'a fī tahrīm nikāh al-mut'a*.

¹⁹ Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, k. [1] *al-Muqaddima*, b. [9] *fī al-īmān*. Cited in Chittick and Rustom, 'Recognition'. Cf. al-Sharīf al-Rādī, *Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of 'Alī* (ed. and transl. Tahera Qutbuddin; Leiden: Brill, 2024), 3.211 (Arabic text).

²⁰ 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī, 'Risāla fī ma'rifat Allāh' in *Majmū'a-yi āsār-i Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān Sulamī* (ed. Naṣr Allāh Pūrjāvādī and Muḥammad Sūrī; Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dānishgāhī, 3 vols., 1369–88 [1990–2009]), iii. 355–61, at 355.

²¹ Ahmad, *Musnad*, m. [7] *Musnad Anas b. Mālik*.

²² Muslim, *Sahīh*, k. [51] *al-Tawba*, b. [8] *qabūl tawbat al-qātil wa-in kathura qatluhu*.

²³ See Mohammed Rustom, 'Ibn 'Arabī's letter to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī: a study and translation', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 25/2 (2014): 113–37, at 135–6.

²⁴ Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb fī mu'amalāt al-mahbūb wa-waṣṭarīq al-murīd maqām al-tawḥīd* (ed. Bāsil 'Uyūn al-Sūd; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2 vols., 1997), i. 234ff.

There is a popular saying, sometimes cited as a ḥadīth (but not in the canonical sources), to the effect that ‘I recognized my Lord through my Lord, and were it not for my Lord’s bounty, I would not have recognized my Lord’.²⁵ The Chinese Muslim scholar Wang Daiyu (d. 1070/1660) offers a Chinese translation and summary of these words in a telling way, anticipating as it does several of the main themes that we will encounter throughout the remainder of this article: ‘The Utmost Sage said, “I am with the Real Lord and recognize the Real Lord with the body. If it were not through the Real Lord, it would be impossible to recognize the Real Lord.”’²⁶

The ḥadīth of the Hidden Treasure (*kanz makhfi*) is important in discussions on recognition. It states that the purpose of human existence is to come to recognize God, who brought about the cosmos through His self-love: ‘I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be recognized; thus I created the creatures so that they would recognize Me.’²⁷ In one of his spiritual discourses, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) unpacks the meaning of this ḥadīth:

God says, ‘I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be recognized’. In other words, ‘I created the whole cosmos, and the goal in all of it was to make Myself manifest, sometimes through gentleness and sometimes through severity’. God is not the sort of king for whom a single herald would be sufficient. Were all the atoms of the universe His heralds, they would fall short and be incapable of making Him recognized.²⁸

But more essential for discussions on *ma’rifa* is the famous saying that is traced back to various figures, ‘He who recognizes his soul will recognize his Lord’.²⁹ In their *Rasā’il* or *Treatises*, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (fl. ca. fourth/tenth century) make good use of this saying in their emphasis upon self-recognition as the means to recognize God.³⁰ A few centuries later, the great Persian philosopher Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 606/1210)

²⁵ See Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yü’s Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih’s Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 222 n. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁷ See ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *The Essence of Reality: A Defense of Philosophical Sufism* (ed. and transl. Mohammed Rustom; New York: New York University Press, 2022), §46.

²⁸ Cited in William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 78–9, with modifications.

²⁹ See the discussion in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 292 n. 45.

³⁰ See, for example, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 4 vols., 2006), i. 76. See also Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’. For Arabic editions and English translations of all of the *Rasā’il*, see the ongoing *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*

explains the link between the aforementioned signs of God and self-recognition:

The levels of the Real's signs in the horizons and the souls are like a locked treasure-house that can be opened with the key that is the human world. There can be correct recognition of a thing only after recognition of self, because, among the created things, nothing has the perfection of humans. All are like parts, and humans are like the whole.³¹

DISTINCTIONS

In Arabic grammar, *ma'rifa* can denote the definite article which serves to indicate a thing in itself, and in legal contexts, *ma'rifa* can be identified with *fahm* or understanding.³² Some theologians, such as the Mu'tazili Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) and the Twelver Shi'i Abū Ja'far al-Tūsī (d. 460/1067), see *ma'rifa* as equivalent to *'ilm* (knowledge).³³ Despite the fact that there are some ten works on *ma'rifa* in the earlier period of Sufism that are all lost,³⁴ it was widely acknowledged by early Sufi authors (and scholars working in other disciplines, as seen above) that recognition and knowledge are, on one level, not necessarily distinct.³⁵ And in cases where they are not identified with one another, it is not uncommon for Sufis to employ them as near equivalents or as hendiadys, as evidenced in this remark of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111): 'If there is no knowledge and recognition, then there is its opposite, which is ignorance and denial.'³⁶ Nevertheless, *ma'rifa* and *'ilm* are most commonly seen as distinct in scope and meaning, particularly among Sufis. This explains why al-Ghazālī identifies the highest science as *ma'rifat Allāh* or 'recognition of God'.³⁷ It can be noted here that, in contexts

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³¹ Chittick, *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, 200.

³² Abū al-Hasan Pażdawī, *Uṣūl al-Bazdawī: kanz al-wuṣūl ilā ma'rifat al-uṣūl* (ed. Sa'īd Bakdāsh; Madina: Dār al-Sirāj, 2016), 91.

³³ *Sharḥ al-Muṣṭalaḥāt al-kalāmiyya* (Mashhad: Majma' al-Buhūth al-Islāmiyya, 1995), 336.

³⁴ Jeremy Farrell, 'Early Sufi literary traditions and a survey of lost works', forthcoming.

³⁵ Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (ed. Anas Muḥammad 'Adnān al-Sharafawī; Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017), 638.

³⁶ Cited in Chittick, *Heart of Islamic Philosophy*, 125.

³⁷ Joseph Lumbard, 'Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and the art of knowing' in Jamal J. Elias and Bilal Orfali (eds.), *Light upon Light: Essays in Islamic Thought and*

where Sufi authors distinguish between *ma'rifa* and 'ilm, translating the former as 'knowledge' and the latter also as 'knowledge' would collapse an important distinction in translation that is present in the original.

But this is not to suggest that non-Sufis did not see *ma'rifa* or recognition as unique. The ethicist and linguist al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502/1108), for example, says that recognition is a kind of perception (*idrāk*) that results from the effects or traces that the known thing displays. It is thus the opposite of *inkār*, which is the inability to perceive something based on the effects or traces that the known thing displays.³⁸ According to the Illuminationist philosopher and scientist Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 710/1311), recognition is the perception of a thing, particularly the first time that perception occurs.³⁹ The Ash'arī theologian al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), on the other hand, defines recognition as 'The existence of a veneration in the heart that prevents you from divesting God of His attributes and declaring Him similar to anything'.⁴⁰ If recognition is understood to be a form of veneration, it is not surprising that many Muslim thinkers also identify it with *īmān* or faith (recall the Prophetic saying cited earlier wherein faith is defined as 'recognizing in the heart'). Commenting on an early theological view that does just this, the Māturīdī theologian Abū al-Yusr Pazdawī (d. 493/1100) explains that the 'measuring' mentioned in Q. 6:91, *They did not measure God with the rightful due of His measure*, refers to recognition and, by extension, faith.⁴¹

Philosophers and Sufis tend to have a more internalized conception of the nature of *ma'rifa*. 'Abd al-Razzāq Lāhījī (d. 1072/1662), for instance, is able to discern in the act of recognition a kind of recovery of something once in the soul, but then lost to it, only to be recovered once again.⁴² The founder of the philosophy of Illumination Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) also sees the soul as the locus of recognition

History in Honor of Gerhard Bowering (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 401–19, at 410–11. Cf. Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: al-Ghazālī's Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation* (London: Routledge, 2011), 33–4.

³⁸ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 114.

³⁹ *Sharḥ al-Muṣṭalahāt al-falsafīyya* (Mashhad: Majma‘ al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyya, 1994), 374.

⁴⁰ *Sharḥ al-Muṣṭalahāt al-kalāmiyya*, 336.

⁴¹ Abū al-Yusr Pazdawī, *Kitāb Uṣūl al-dīn* (ed. Hans Peter Linss; Cairo: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1963), 147–8.

⁴² *Sharḥ al-Muṣṭalahāt al-kalāmiyya*, 337.

precisely because it is the result of God's 'impressing' (*irtisām*) divine realities into it in accordance with its capacity.⁴³

That recognition has to do with discerning the presence of God is a fairly standard teaching in Sufi and philosophical texts. The early Sufi figure Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990) speaks of recognition as precisely an awareness of God's proximity, which then leads to the avoidance of disobeying God.⁴⁴ The philosopher-scientist Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) sees the recognition of God as consisting of several levels. These include the ability to recognize that all things in the cosmos go back to God's attributes and, at the highest level, the ability to recognize one's self in each of these divine attributes as manifested in the cosmos, seeing the self as part of a greater whole in the circle of knowledge, recognition, and existence.⁴⁵ More specifically, recognition is often seen as a human attribute that is activated by an awareness of the divine attributes, which then leads to action. The great Sufi master and Qur'ān commentator al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) provides a succinct formulation: '[Recognition is] an attribute of the one who recognizes the Real through His names and attributes and then is sincere with God in his actions, purifying himself from his base character traits and defects'.⁴⁶

It should be clear by this point that recognition is a specifically human characteristic and for the most part does not apply to God. This explains why one of God's divine names is not 'ārif or 'recognizer', and, as we have seen, He is never the subject of the '-r-f' root in the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, insofar as recognition refers to a general sense of awareness and knowledge, God is occasionally associated with *ma'rifa* in Islamic literature, more commonly in earlier texts. For example, in a text attributed to the eponymous founder of the Hanafī legal school, Abū Hanīfa (d. 150/767) speaks of God's recognition as an awareness of things that complement His knowledge, perhaps hinting at a distinction between God's knowledge in time as opposed to His eternal knowledge.⁴⁷ In *The Path of Eloquence* (*Nahj al-balāgha*), 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) refers to God as an 'ārif, describing Him as 'a knower of the creatures before their beginnings, surrounding their limits and ends, and an 'ārif of their associations and inclinations'.⁴⁸

The main reason why *ma'rifa* in the sense of recognition is not attributable to God is because the word implies a recognition of things by

⁴³ Ibid., 374.

⁴⁴ Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf li-madhab abl al-taṣawwuf* (ed. A. J. Arberry; Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1933), 40.

⁴⁵ Sajjādī, *Farhang-i iṣṭilāhāt va ta'bīrat-i 'irfānī*, 732.

⁴⁶ al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 638.

⁴⁷ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 113.

⁴⁸ Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, 1.1.2 (Arabic text).

virtue of the effects they display, which cannot apply to God.⁴⁹ At the same time, recognition implies previous ignorance of known things, in contrast to knowledge, which is why only the latter can be used to qualify God. The polymath al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) offers a clear explanation of the problem: '[Recognition is] the perception, preceded by ignorance, of a thing as it is. This is different from knowledge, which is why God is called "knower" and not "recognizer".'⁵⁰

One can come away with a better sense of the meaning of recognition when it is seen in contrast to knowledge. A fundamental difference between them is that recognition is more particular than knowledge. As Murtadā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790) explains in his popular Arabic dictionary, 'Recognition is to perceive something by reflecting and pondering upon its trace, which is more specific than knowledge'.⁵¹

The particularity of recognition does not mean that it is necessarily more difficult to obtain or even superior to knowledge. The early Sufi master al-Kharrāz (d. ca. 286/899) says that when it comes to knowing God, 'Knowledge of God is more hidden and finer than recognition of God'.⁵² Indeed, for the 'greatest master' Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), on one level, *'ilm* is superior to *ma'rifa* because the former is tied to God whereas the latter is not. But even here, as is the case with most other authors, he sees the recognizers as the most exalted kinds of knowers.⁵³ Yet this does not stop Ibn 'Arabī from understanding recognition to be a more unassailable form of knowing, as opposed to conventional knowledge:

For the Tribe, recognition is a path. Hence any knowledge which can be actualized only through deeds, godwariness, and wayfaring is recognition, since it derives from a verified unveiling which is not seized by obfuscation. This contrasts with the knowledge which is actualized through reflective consideration, which is never safe from obfuscation and bewilderment, nor from rejection of that which leads to it.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 114.

⁵⁰ 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Jurjānī, *Ta'rīfāt*, art. s.v. 'ma'rifa', <http://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com>. Cf. Chittick and Rustom, 'Recognition'.

⁵¹ Murtadā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'arūs*, art. s.v. 'ma'rifa', <http://arabiclexicon.hawramani.com>.

⁵² al-Kalābādhī, *Ta'arruf*, 40.

⁵³ William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought* (ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 101.

⁵⁴ Cited in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 149, with modifications.

Sufi authors see recognition as being distinctly bestowed by God (*muuabbab*), whereas knowledge is acquired through human effort (*muktasab*).⁵⁵ Tantamount to finding (*wujūd*) and unveiling (*kashf*),⁵⁶ recognition is, as the female Sufi Umm Ahmad bt. ‘Ā’isha (d. fourth/tenth century) notes, a light and insight that is conferred upon a person by God.⁵⁷ Ahmad Sam‘ānī (d. 534/1140), author of the most detailed and stylistically beautiful commentary upon the divine names in Persian, identifies recognition with this selfsame light that is mediated by human intelligence:

When the light comes to the heart, it turns into love; when it comes to the secret core, it becomes unveiling; when it comes to the mind, it becomes union; when it comes to the tongue, it bears witness; when it comes to the limbs, it becomes practice; and when it comes to the intellect, it becomes recognition.⁵⁸

Knowledge that comes directly from God and is filtered through the intellect is worlds apart from knowledge that is acquired through one’s own efforts and intellectual toil. This is to say that knowledge acquired by any means other than God pales in comparison to recognition. This is why the Sufi martyr and lover of God ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131) inveighs against those philosophers and theologians who label themselves as ‘recognizers’ on account of the ‘knowledge’ that they have arrived at through study, debate, and discussion:

O friend! A group among the philosophers and rational theologians call themselves ‘recognizers’. *That is the extent of their knowledge* [Q. 53:30]. They imagine that, from the path of nonsense, a person will arrive at recognition. No, never! O friend! What business do I have with this?⁵⁹

Being taught directly by God is an entirely different form of knowing: the knower depends on his own striving and abilities, whereas the recognizer depends entirely on God to teach him. Thus, the Sufis say, ‘The recognizer is above what he says, but the knower is below what he says.’⁶⁰ At the same time, ‘The knower subsists through himself, but

⁵⁵ Arnaldez, ‘Ma’rifa’.

⁵⁶ Paul Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmans* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), 272–4.

⁵⁷ ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-mutab‘abbiyat as-Sūfiyyāt* (transl. Rkia Elaroui Cornell; Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 219 (Arabic text).

⁵⁸ Ahmad Sam‘ānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names* (transl. William C. Chittick; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019), 423.

⁵⁹ Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 144–5.

⁶⁰ Cited in Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’.

the recognizer subsists through God',⁶¹ and 'The recognizer understands God through God, whereas the knower understands God through other than Him'.⁶²

As the title of the present article indicates, there is recognition per se, but this recognition is predicated upon the ability to recognize what this recognition entails. The cue is taken here from the profound and enigmatic 'halting-places' (*mawāqif*) of the early Sufi master Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. 354/965), who in his *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* (*Book of Halting-Places*) speaks of the 'Halting Place of Recognizing the Recognitions' (*mawqif ma'rifat al-ma'arif*). The major Sufi philosopher and member of the 'School of Ibn 'Arabī'⁶³ 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) explains this *mawqif*:

Know that recognizing the recognitions is a station, but it is beneath the station of recognition. This is because recognition is recognizing God gradually from the levels of His names, His attributes, and His acts, so it is related to God. As for recognizing the recognitions, it is the recognition of that recognition, so it is related to the forms of recognizing God, not to God.⁶⁴

We shall soon see that this ability to recognize the many ways in which God can be recognized is tantamount to seeing the connection between the act of the remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and *ma'rifa*, both theoretically and practically.

RECOGNITION AND REMEMBRANCE

While recognition is seen as a gift from God, a person must still go through a great deal of spiritual discipline in order to open himself up

⁶¹ 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-mahjūb* (ed. Muḥammad Husayn Tasbīhī; Islamabad: Intishārāt-i Markaz-i Tahqīqāt-i Fārsī, 1995), 552.

⁶² al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism, Black and White*, 69.

⁶³ For which, see Mukhtar H. Ali, *Inscriptions of Wisdom: The Sufism of Ibn al-'Arabī in the Mirror of Jāmī* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, forthcoming); id., *Philosophical Sufism*; William C. Chittick, *Dirāsāt fī fikr al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī wa-madrasatihī* (ed. Abdel Baki Meftah; transl. Naser Dumairieh; Kuwait: Dār al-Ma'ānī, 2023); id., *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 71–198; Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn al-'Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2016); Richard Todd, *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Ḫadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's Metaphysical Anthropology* (Brill: Leiden, 2014).

⁶⁴ Cited in Chittick and Rustom, 'Recognition'. For more on al-Tilimsānī, see 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī, *The Divine Names: A Mystical Theology of the Names of God in the Qur'an* (ed. and transl. Yousef Casewit; New York: New York University Press, 2023).

to receiving that gift. This is a key insight of Abū Ḥafs ‘Umar al-Suhrawardi’s (d. 632/1234) *‘Awārif al-ma‘ārif*, one of the most important Sufi teaching-texts of the past 800 years.⁶⁵ The quest therefore begins with following the shari‘a and undertaking practices specific to the inner life. The well-known early Muslim moral psychologist al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) sees the exercise of watchfulness (*murāqaba*) as the door to the recognition of God. But in order to recognize God, one must become watchful of one’s deeds, the tricks of the ego, and the snares of the devil. This will bring about a general form of recognition that will then pave the way for a specific recognition of God that is rooted in one’s heart and leads to inner resolve, action, and an awareness of God’s watchfulness over him.⁶⁶

Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) tells us that the highest class of human beings devote themselves to nothing but recognition of the realities of things, especially the recognition of God.⁶⁷ To be sure, this can only come through the realization of God’s utter oneness and by extension our nothingness before Him—what the early Sufi author al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) calls ‘the realization of Lordhood’ (*tahqīq al-rubūbiyya*).⁶⁸ This kind of realization is to be distinguished from the general state of the worshipper (*‘ābid*) and the renunciant (*zāhid*). Sufi teachers such as Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 220/835) explain that a person with true recognition while asleep beholds more divine truths than an ordinary worshipper who is awake and standing in prayer.⁶⁹ And, with no exaggeration intended, one of the most significant Sufi masters Abū Yazid Baṣṭāmī (d. ca. 260/874) states that ‘The recognizer flies, whereas the renunciant walks’.⁷⁰

Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) weighs in on the difference between renunciants, worshippers, and recognizers. He notes that the renunciants’ sole focus is on turning away from the world and its pleasures, whereas worshippers are dedicated to acts of obedience and worship. Recognizers are also characterized by disengagement from the body and material attachments, as well as acts of worship—but their acts of worship are

⁶⁵ For more on this work and its treatment of recognition, see Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’.

⁶⁶ al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, *Sharḥ al-ma‘rifa wa-badhl al-nasīha* (ed. Majdī Fathī al-Sayyid; Tanta: Dār al-Sahāba, 1993), 18–22.

⁶⁷ Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, ‘al-Risāla al-mufsiha’ in *Annäherungen: Der mystisch-philosophische Briefwechsel zwischen Ṣadr ud-Dīn-i Qūnawī und Naṣīr ud-Dīn-i Ṭūsī* (ed. Gudrun Schubert; Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1995), 15–46, at 16 (Arabic text).

⁶⁸ al-Sarrāj, *Luma‘*, 36.

⁶⁹ al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism, Black and White*, 67.

⁷⁰ al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 643.

for the sake of God alone, without any thought on their part of some kind of gain or fear of loss in doing so. Most importantly, Ibn Sīnā explains that the recognizers are also distinct in that their focus is solely meditation (*fikr*). With their gaze firmly fixed on God, their hearts are perpetually illuminated by the divine Presence.⁷¹

Ibn Sīnā also says that the heart is further subtilized and enlivened through ‘subtle meditation’ (*al-fikr al-latīf*) alongside increased awareness in the love of God.⁷² Through this spiritual discipline, the recognizer’s heart becomes a pure mirror that reflects the presence of God. It is as the Sufi teacher Ruwaym b. Ahmad (d. 303/915) once said, namely that ‘The recognizer has a mirror—when he looks in it, his Master discloses Himself to him’.⁷³ Conferred upon the recognizer’s heart therefore is an internal joy, or joy of self, because of the ‘trace of the Real that is in it’.⁷⁴

That Ibn Sīnā means ‘meditation’ when he speaks of *fikr* is made clear by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, who distinguishes between *fikr* and *tafakkur* or thinking (note how *fikr* here for both Ibn Sīnā and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is a verbal noun, and thus not a faculty *per se*). The former leads to recognition, whereas the latter entails a dead-end: ‘Recognition of God is only obtained through correct meditation. I am speaking about meditation, not reflective thinking.’⁷⁵ Like Ibn Sīnā’s subtle heart, proper meditation can only take place when the heart is limpid, pure, and free: ‘Correct meditation is only obtained by a limpid heart that is pure from worldly occupations and bodily attachments.’⁷⁶ Addressing this very point, the Egyptian Sufi master Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) advises, ‘Empty your heart of other than God and it will be filled with recognition and mysteries.’⁷⁷ The recognizer’s pure heart is thus the locus of many unveilings and divine gifts. Consider these moving lines sung by Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896):

⁷¹ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt* (ed. Mujtabā al-Zāri‘i; Qum: Būstān-i Kitāb-i Qum, 1423 [2002]), 355–7.

⁷² Ibid., 359–60.

⁷³ al-Sirjānī, *Sufism, Black and White*, 69. See also Abū Khalaf al-Tabarī, *The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism* (ed. Gerhard Bowering and Bilal Orfali; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 187.

⁷⁴ Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, 362–3. For a more complete exposition of Ibn Sīnā’s treatment of *ma’rifa*, see Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’. A Gutas-inspired reading can be found in Michael A. Rapoport, *Science of the Soul in Ibn Sīnā’s Pointers and Reminders: A Philological Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 188–200.

⁷⁵ Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 38.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh, *Aphorisms* (transl. with vocalized Arabic text Mohammed Rustom; Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, forthcoming), no. 206.

The hearts of the recognizers have eyes
 that see what is not shown to others;
 tongues that whisper mysteries,
 even evading the recording angels;
 and wings that fly, without feathers,
 to the kingdom of the Lord of the worlds.⁷⁸

The Sufis commonly assign the word *dhikr* to what many today would think of as ‘meditation’. *Dhikr*, always with God as its object, can mean to remember, invoke, and recall. This remembrance of God is commonly cultivated through the systematic and prolonged practice of invoking certain divine formulae, the names of God, or, more specifically and efficaciously, the supreme Name Allāh, which is ‘the mark of the Real upon the hearts of the folk of recognition’.⁷⁹ But there are also other forms of meditation that can engender recognition, particularly those that involve reflecting upon God’s signs, which are to be found within the reflecting subject and outside of him (see Q. 41:53, cited earlier). The Andalusian Sufi and Qur’ān-commentator Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) explains this point with crystal clarity:

Reflecting on the signs of God and acquiring knowledge of them is the most excellent act of worship because it draws one in to remembrance within the remembrance. Moreover, this recognition only comes from lengthy meditation and repeated contemplation over God’s creation and artisanry.⁸⁰

The function of *dhikr* as an act of remembering and recalling is particularly important for recognition since every time a person does *dhikr* he can potentially recall, and thus re-recognize, his primordial state wherein he was in the presence of God, being made to bear witness to His oneness as declared in Q. 7:172.⁸¹ It is in contexts such as these where translating *ma'rifa* as ‘gnosis’ can particularly obscure the point. If one insists on a translation like that in such instances, what then will one do with the verb ‘*arafa*?’ Surely it cannot be translated to ‘gnosticize’. One would then have to resort to the verb ‘to know’, in which case a false

⁷⁸ Martin Lings (ed. and transl.), *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2004), 15 (Arabic text).

⁷⁹ Cited in Rustom, ‘Forms of gnosis’, 333, with modifications.

⁸⁰ Cited in Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barrajān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 114–15, with modifications.

⁸¹ For which, see Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), 107–8.

distinction would be created between ‘gnosis’ and ‘to know’, while also further obscuring the Sufi emphasis on *ma‘rifa* as the act of recognizing God’s signs (which are already in the human soul) through *dhikr*.

Meditating on Q. 7:172 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt explains the precise link between re-calling and re-cognizing: ‘O dear friend! Recall that Day when the beauty of “*Am I not your Lord?*” was displayed to you ... There was no spirit that did not see Him, and there was no ear but that it heard the audition of the Quran from Him.’⁸² It is also with reference to Q. 7:172 that the significance of the dictum ‘He who recognizes his soul will recognize his Lord’ can be discerned. By increasingly recalling and recognizing the true nature of the soul as having its origin in God and as containing all of the divine names (see Q. 2:31), one’s self-recognition and recognition of God can intensify accordingly. In other words, through immersion in the remembrance of God, a person’s self-recognition will entail greater states of being and awareness and hence deeper levels of participation in divine consciousness and presence.

This kind of self-recognition, as the Indian sage Shaykh Maḥmūd Khwush-Dahān (d. 1026/1617) reminds us, is the purpose of the Sufi path.⁸³ Without self-recognition, we are cautioned by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, there can be no hope of God-recognition: ‘One must recognize himself so that he may recognize his Lord. They do not have self-recognition, so how can they have recognition of God?! They are estranged.’⁸⁴ Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), who is known to have emphasized self-recognition as the elixir (*iksīr*) for those in quest of knowing God and self,⁸⁵ offers an unparalleled exposition of the intimate connection between remembering (*tadhakkur*), self-recognition (*ma‘rifat al-nafs*), and the attendant levels of increased awareness (*shu‘ūr*):

Given that forgetting God is the cause of forgetting the soul, remembering the soul brings about remembering the Lord. And indeed, remembering the Lord brings about His remembering the soul: *Remember Me and I will remember you* [Q. 2:152]. And the Lord’s remembering the soul is the same as the soul’s existence, for the Real’s knowledge of things is by presence [with the things]. Hence, when someone does not recognize the soul, his soul will not have existence, for the soul’s existence is the same as light, presence, and awareness.⁸⁶

⁸² Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 172.

⁸³ See Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, ch. 16, 181–98.

⁸⁴ Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 153.

⁸⁵ Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics* (ed. and transl. William C. Chittick; Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2003).

⁸⁶ Cited in Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’.

While many Sufi texts emphasize the link between the simultaneous cultivation of self-recognition and divine recognition through *dhikr*, there is as much if not more emphasis on the role of *dhikr* in bringing about the recognition of God and which causes a type of self-forgetting. Al-Qushayrī gives us a window into what texts of this nature look like when he says, ‘Recognition demands the servant’s absence from his soul because of being overcome by the remembrance of the Real, so he witnesses none but God and does not come back to other than Him.’⁸⁷

RECOGNITION AND ATTAINMENT

Sufi authors who discuss the goal and ‘results’ of *ma'rifa* do not necessarily link them to *dhikr*. Indeed, their statements on recognition often presuppose their immersion and realization in the ocean of *dhikr*. What they offer to us are more akin to some of the precious corals that they have discovered from this deep dive. Those who cannot swim in recognition’s waters should, as ‘Attār (d. 618/1221) advises in his *Mantiq al-tayr* (*Speech of the Birds*), at least have a sense of regret:

Drown yourself in the ocean of recognition.
If not, then at least throw dust on your head!⁸⁸

This sense of loss can impel one to search, leading to the discovery that, courtesy of those who have swum and drowned in this ocean, there are plenty of corals on display. Some of the earliest and best known of them go back to the highly influential Sufi figure Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. *ca.* 245/859), which in a sense set the stage for later expositions. He tells us, for example, that ‘The recognizer is a man who is with men, but separate from them’, and this because he is attached to God and nothing else: ‘The recognizer does not adhere to a single state—he only adheres to his Lord in every state.’ The recognizer is in fact no longer ‘here’. It is more appropriate to say that he ‘was here, and then departed’. To be sure, time and change do not apply to the recognizer, much less spatial referents,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, *Mantiq al-tayr* (ed. Muḥammad Ridā Shafī‘i-Kadkānī; Tehran: Intishārāt-i Sukhan, 4th edn., 2008), 393, l. 3523. For a new study of ‘Attār, see Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Religion of Love: Sufism and Self-Transformation in the Poetic Imagination of ‘Attār* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2024).

since '[The final outcome of the recognizer] is when he is just as he was where he was before he was'.⁸⁹

The recognizer is in other words totally effaced and has no state per se. His identity (*huwiyya*; lit. 'he-ness') has been replaced by the divine identity.⁹⁰ Everything else disappears for the recognizer upon the appearance of the Real and his act of beholding Him. Seeing himself and God thus, the recognizer even becomes absent to himself as he can only see the blinding light of God in the fullness of its splendour and glory.⁹¹ Indeed, before the divine sun, all else is mere shadow, darkness, and illusion. As the Berber Friend of God Abū Ya‘zā (d. 572/1177) once said, 'Recognition is a sun—when the sun appears, the stars vanish'.⁹² The intensity of the heat of the divine Presence melts away the substance of the recognizer's soul, reducing him to ashes. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī explains this point succinctly: 'The end of recognition is that the recognizer is annihilated, like a person who has burned in fire and become nothing'.⁹³

Insofar as we can speak of the recognizer as a human subject, the author of the first Sufi text in Persian Abū Ibrāhīm Mustamlī Bukhārī (d. 434/1043) observes that recognition of God can only happen through Him: 'The path that shows the way to God is God Himself. God can be recognized through God—not through other than Him'.⁹⁴ Consider also the remark made by the Sufi philosopher al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 298/910), who says that recognition is 'of the Real, by the Real, in the Real, and from the Real'.⁹⁵ The logic of these points is fleshed out in greater detail by al-Kalābādhī: 'God caused Himself to be recognized to us through Himself, and pointed us to recognition of Himself through Himself. He is the witness of recognition from recognition, through

⁸⁹ All cited in Mohammed Rustom, 'The Sufi teachings of Dhu'l-Nun', *Sacred Web*, 24 (2009): 69–79, at 74, with modifications.

⁹⁰ al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 640. See also al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 40; al-Ṭabarī, *Comfort of the Mystics*, 186–7.

⁹¹ Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, 363.

⁹² Vincent Cornell (ed. and transl.), *The Way of Abu Madyan* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 183 (Arabic text).

⁹³ Sajjādī, *Farhang-i istilāhāt va ta'bīrāt-i 'irfānī*, 733.

⁹⁴ Abū Ibrāhīm Mustamlī Bukhārī, *Sharḥ al-Ta'arruf li-mazhab al-taṣavvuf: nūr al-murīdīn va fazīḥāt al-muddī'īn* (ed. Muhammad Rawshan; Tehran: Intishārāt-i Asāṭir, 5 vols., 1363–6 [1984–7]), ii. 708–9. See also al-Sīrjānī, *Sufism, Black and White*, 64.

⁹⁵ al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb Ma'rifat al-asrār* (ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Juyūshī; Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍa al-‘Arabiyya, 1977), 80.

recognition, after causing recognition of the recognized through recognition.'⁹⁶

Yet this does not stop the likes of the Sufi martyr al-Hallāj (d. 309/922) from declaring that even this level of recognition entails some form of dualism. Because ‘recognition is beyond the beyond, being beyond periods of time, aspirations, mysteries, reports, and perceptions’,⁹⁷ ‘whoever says “I recognized Him through Him” alludes to two things that are recognized’.⁹⁸ Since there is only one ‘thing’ that is recognized, God is simultaneously the basis and object of recognition.

The recognizers’ actual ontological situation is more like emptiness and poverty than anything else. God is the only self in existence, while all else is reduced to nothingness.⁹⁹ Commenting on a popular early Sufi maxim, ‘When poverty is perfected, he is God’, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt draws the natural conclusion: in recognizing our true self, we come to recognize the divine Self, but not as ‘recognizers’ distinct from God: ‘Your selfhood should live in Selfhood until you become all He. Then, poverty will appear, as poverty will be perfected: “When poverty is perfected, he is God”. That is, your entirety will be He.’¹⁰⁰

It was stated earlier that the noun ‘recognizer’ and the verb ‘to recognize’ almost never apply to God in texts across the broad spectrum of Islamic thought. Yet this is slightly complicated by the degree of emphasis we see in Sufi texts on who is actually doing the recognizing. In other words, if there is no self to recognize the Recognized, and there is only one Self in actuality, who, then, is doing the recognizing, and of whom? The prolific early Sufi author ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) offers his answer in no ambiguous terms: none can truly recognize God except Himself.¹⁰¹ This also means that whatever we do recognize of God is always in accordance with our own limited perspectives, which is the meaning of Q 6:91, *They do not measure God with the rightful due of His measure*.¹⁰² Thus, God is both the Recognizer and the Recognized. It is from this perspective that Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d. ca. 720/1320) states in his Persian masterpiece of Sufi metaphysics the *Gulshan-i rāz* (*The Rose Garden of Mystery*):

⁹⁶ al-Kalābādhī, *Ta‘arruf*, 39.

⁹⁷ Husayn b. Mansūr al-Hallāj, *Kitāb al-Tawāṣīn* (ed. Louis Massignon; Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1913), 70.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁹⁹ Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 246.

¹⁰¹ al-Sulamī, ‘Risāla fī ma‘rifat Allāh’, 355. See also al-Sarrāj, *Luma‘*, 36; cf. al-Kalābādhī, *Ta‘arruf*, 37.

¹⁰² Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’.

No distinction at all remains between them:

recognized and recognizer have become one thing.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, the human subject who employs language and can speak of recognition is not an illusion, even if the act of recognition of the Recognized takes place through the Recognized. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that our binary ways of looking at this through ‘either/or’ lenses will simply not suffice to explain the subtlety involved at the highest reaches of recognition. Unpacking Junayd’s famous statement ‘The water takes on the color of its cup’,¹⁰⁴ the greatest master states: ‘When Junayd was asked about recognition and the recognizer, he replied, “The water takes on the colour of its cup”. In other words, the recognizer assumes the character traits of God to the point where it seems as if he is He. He is not He, yet he is He.’¹⁰⁵

The true situation of recognition is therefore not a matter of ‘either/or’, but of ‘either *and* or’; or, more precisely, ‘He/not He’. Recognition begins with bewilderment (*hayra*) and ends in bewilderment: ‘Recognition begins with self-bewilderment and agitation, and ends with annihilation from all other than God and bewilderment at the negation of ecstasy.’¹⁰⁶ As the celebrated Indian Sufi poet Bīdil (d. 1133/1720) sings:

His nearness and farness: the presence and absence of self.

Understanding His self leads to bewilderment of self.¹⁰⁷

Likely taking his cue from the saying ‘He who recognizes his soul will recognize his Lord’, Wang Daiyu employs the Chinese term *jen* for recognition and shows that the goal of recognition is to recognize God, but without attachment to any sense of human agency. He thus divides recognition into three types. First there is ‘recognition with knowledge’, which ‘is to inquire about and to imitate what the sages and worthies reflected upon and witnessed’. Then there is ‘recognition with seeing’,

¹⁰³ Mahmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i rāz* (ed. Javād Nūrbakhsh; Tehran: Intishārāt-i Khānaqāh-i Ni‘mat Allāhī, 2535 [1976]), 28, l. 109. For a bilingual Persian edition and new translation of the *Gulshan-i rāz*, accompanied by a penetrating Sufi commentary upon it, see Mahmūd Shabistarī, *The Rose Garden of Divine Mysteries: Gulshan-i Rāz* (transl., ed., and comm. Seyyed Hossein Nasr; ed. Rana Shieh; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2025).

¹⁰⁴ al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 644 (cited in Chittick and Rustom, ‘Recognition’).

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 149, with modifications.

¹⁰⁶ al-Tirmidhī, *Ma‘rifat al-asrār*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Ali Karjoo-Ravary, ‘Mirrors in the dream of the Alone: a glimpse at the poetry of Bīdil’ in Mohammed Rustom (ed.), *Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation: Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 30–54, at 40.

which ‘is transcending all the conditions so that you experience yourself intimately and, while depending on the body, you recognize the Real Lord with the body’. Lastly there is ‘recognition with continuity’, which is ‘conquering entirely both crooked selfishness and opinions of self, returning completely to the fountainhead of clear virtue, and recognizing the Real Lord with body while depending on no-self’.¹⁰⁸

The Prophet’s Companion and father-in-law (and the first Sunni caliph) Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) famously stated, ‘Glory to the One who has not made a path to recognize Him except through the incapacity to recognize Him’.¹⁰⁹ So consumed is the recognizer in all his nothingness and in the act of recognition, and so exalted is the object of recognition, that he loses all sense of self and cannot discern himself as a perceiving subject.¹¹⁰ The recognizer is, at best, dumbstruck and confounded, which is why Junayd said that ‘Whoever recognizes God becomes speechless’.¹¹¹ Coming from the ocean of the beginningless, recognition causes the temporal waves to ebb back into the source from whence they first came. The recognizer’s ‘awareness’ is just as it was before he was, but it is an awareness nevertheless. The illustrious Moroccan Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815) explains this highest level of recognition in a remarkably clear manner:

Real recognition is when the servant is taken by God in such a way that he does not recognize its root, nor its distinguishing feature, nor its cause He no longer has an awareness of his senses, his witnessing, his effacement, his will, and his desire. Rather, this recognition comes from a divine self-disclosure that has neither beginning, nor goal, nor limit, nor end. The servant is so effaced that he no longer has awareness of anything—neither of the nonexistence of his awareness, nor of his effacement.¹¹²

In the final analysis, although there is a recognizer, there is no recognizer. Although there is an object of recognition, there is no object of recognition. All there is is ignorance, confoundedness, and bewilderment.

¹⁰⁸ All cited in Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light*, 97–9.

¹⁰⁹ al-Ṣīrjānī, *Sufism, Black and White*, 62. See also al-Sarrāj, *Luma'*, 36; cf. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Essence of Reality*, §76.

¹¹⁰ See Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, 157.

¹¹¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 145.

¹¹² Cited in Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Sufism and Ifa, Two West African Intellectual Traditions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 80, with modifications.