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SUFISM

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I Introduction

The Arabic word *ṣūfī*, the original sense of which has been much discussed, came into use in the second century AH/eighth century CE¹ to designate a certain sort of pious, usually ascetic, individual. Its derivative form “Sufism” (*taṣawwuf*, literally, “to be a *ṣūfī*”) has been one of several terms used to designate those tendencies of Islamic thought and practice that focus on the inner domain of the human spirit rather than the outer domain of ritual activity, social rules, and creedal dogmatics. Many Western scholars have referred to Sufism as mysticism, esotericism, or spirituality, but there is no consensus as to what exactly it, or any of these words, designates. The difficulty of defining the word “Sufism” itself is partly the result of the historical and geographical vagaries of the word’s usage and the frequent controversies over its legitimacy – controversies in which the two sides typically had radically different notions of what it denotes. Throughout Islamic history, numerous definitions have been offered by authors claiming to speak for it. These are rarely consistent with the notion that Sufism had a clearly defined identity, especially when we take into account the definitions offered by critics.² In what follows, I use the word as a designation for the focus on “interiority” that is found in the sources of the Islamic tradition and in countless authors down through the centuries, whether or not the term

¹ “AH” stands for the Latin *anno Hegirae* (“in the year of the Hijra”) and designates a year or period in the Muslim calendar. Year one was 622 CE, in which Muhammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina, known as the Hijra.

² A century ago, the well-known Orientalist R. A. Nicholson published “A Historical Enquiry Concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1906), which included a list of seventy-eight early definitions by Sufi authors. A longer list is found in J. Nurbakhsh, *Sufism: Meaning, Knowledge, and Unity* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi, 1981).

"Sufism" itself was employed in each case. I will discuss three broad issues: Sufism's relation to other fields of learning, its characteristic approach to theory, and its understanding of the role of praxis.

2 The Three Dimensions of Islam

The Koran and the Hadith (the sayings of Muhammad) are full of raw material for the disciplines that came to be called jurisprudence (*fiqh*), scholastic theology (*kalām*), philosophy, and Sufism, but these disciplines themselves appeared gradually. When scholars say that Sufism originated in the second/eighth or third/ninth centuries, they mean that before that time, the sources do not delineate the specific concerns that differentiate the Sufis of later times from other Muslims. The same is true, however, for the other approaches to Islamic thought and practice – not least jurisprudence and scholastic theology, which are often said to represent "orthodox" Islam.

We can attempt to unravel the interwoven strands of germinal Islam by differentiating among three dimensions of human concern: practice, understanding, and transformation. On the most outward, "exoteric" level, the Koran and Hadith lay down rules and regulations for right and wrong activity, such as the "five pillars," the essential acts of every Muslim. This strand of Islam became codified and institutionalized in the various schools of jurisprudence, all of which were trying to explicate what is commonly called the Shariah (*sharī'a*, literally "road leading to water"), a word that is usually translated as sacred or revealed law.

On a more subtle level, the Koran and the Hadith provide guidelines for right understanding and right thought. Both have a great deal to say about the "unseen" (*ghayb*), which includes God, angels, and the Last Day, and they mention that God has sent scriptures and prophets. Muslims are told to have "faith" (*īmān*) in all this, though the word's semantic field overlaps with that of knowledge (*ilm*). Faith implies understanding the truth of these notions and committing oneself to the praxis that they entail. Schools of thought explicating the significance of faith and its objects began to appear in the second/eighth century and are typically classified as scholastic theology or as philosophy. Scholastic theologians attempted in a rather dogmatic way to clarify and rationalize the Koran's teachings about God, the universe, and human destiny; philosophers addressed the same subjects (and others as well) without limiting themselves to properly "Islamic" sources, taking much of their inspiration from the content and methodology of Greek thought, especially Aristotle, Plotinus, and the Corpus Hermeticum.

Parallel with these two approaches, a further approach was found in various saintly figures who relied on inner insight (*baṣīra*) and mystical "unveiling" (*kashf*). They claimed that the only way to acquire true understanding of God, the world, and the soul was to adhere assiduously to the outer and inner model of human perfection established by the Prophet. Their watchword was "Be truly pious, and God will teach you" (Koran 2:282). They respected rational thought but recognized its limitations, especially in its attempts to unravel the nature of the unseen. They sought to achieve what later was called "a stage beyond the stage of reason" (*ṭawr warā' ṭawr al-'aql*). Once this strand of thought and practice became differentiated from other strands, these figures were looked back on as the early Sufis. Every one of the many hagiographical accounts that talk about their lives and teachings traces their approach back to the Prophet himself and some of his outstanding companions, especially his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī and the first caliph Abū Bakr.

Those who took this Sufi approach based themselves squarely on the Koran and the Hadith. In their view, the primary concern of these sources was to guide people in re-joining their Divine Source. They saw the prototype of their path in Muhammad's "ladder" (*mi'rāj*) or "night journey" (*isrā*), during which the angel Gabriel took him up stage-by-stage to the highest heaven, from which he entered alone into God's presence. This was the second of the two defining moments of Islam's foundation, the first being God's revelation of the Koran – which also took place through the intermediary Gabriel. For the Sufi tradition down through the centuries, the goal of both right practice and right understanding has been to assimilate the Koranic revelation and, on that basis, to ascend the ladder in the footsteps of the path breaker, the Prophet himself.

By the time of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), a scholar of great renown, there existed a variety of approaches to understanding God, the universe, and the human soul. Scholastic theologians gave pride of place to rational interpretation of the Koran; Hellenophile philosophers preferred rational interpretation of the universe and the soul in the context of a metaphysics of being; and Sufis claimed access to the unveiling of the esoteric meanings of the Koran, the cosmos, and the human self. Al-Ghazālī himself was a synthesizer, drawing from jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and Sufism. The oft-repeated assertion that he brought Sufism into the Islamic mainstream means that he helped give it a high profile in the official religious establishment. What he was doing, however, was making explicit the Koranic stress on balance among practice, understanding, and transformation.

By “transformation,” the third dimension of human concern, I mean achieving conformity with the Source of all, or what al-Ghazālī and others called “becoming characterized by the character traits of God” (*takhalluq bi akhlāq Allāh*). The competence of the jurists is limited to right and wrong activity, and that of the scholastic theologians to the rational defense of the articles of faith. What characterizes the specifically Sufi approach is the insistence that true understanding of and conformity to the Divine Reality depend on the soul’s transformation. The philosophers also had a good deal to say about this issue – they spoke about achieving “conjunction” (*ittiṣāl*) with the Agent Intellect or “deiformity” (*ta’ alluh*, from the same root as *Allāh*) – but with some exceptions, they tended to get bogged down in the rational preliminaries and had little to say about the Koranic path. In contrast, the Sufi masters spoke from the standpoint of having climbed the ladder to God in the Prophet’s footsteps.

3 The Three Principles of Understanding

In a brief overview such as this, it would be impossible to do justice to the major authors who produced significant works on Sufi theory. Instead, I address a few of the basic themes, the contours of which can be summed up in what are commonly called the three “principles” (*aṣl*) of faith: the assertion of God’s unity (*tawḥīd*); prophecy (*nubuwwa*), or divine guidance; and the return (*ma’ād*) to God, or eschatology. When elaborated by scholastic theologians, philosophers, and Sufis, *tawḥīd* developed into various approaches to metaphysics and theology; *nubuwwa* yielded elaborate discussions of human perfection and spiritual anthropology; and *ma’ād* focused on the posthumous development of the soul and the means to achieve a happy resting place.

The first of the five pillars of Islamic practice is a speech act: “bearing witness” (*shahāda*) that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger. Jurists have much to say about how and when one performs this act, but they have nothing to say about its meaning, which is the domain of the theologians, Sufis, and philosophers. The first half, “(There is) no god but God” is known as the sentence declaring *tawḥīd*. The Koran says that God is designated by “the most beautiful names.” The quickest way to grasp the implications of *tawḥīd* is to insert the divine names into the formula: God is One, so “None is one but God.” God is Alive, so “None is alive but God.” God is Knowing, so “None is knowing but God.” God is Desiring, so “None is desiring but God.” In short, every real quality, not least existence itself, pertains exclusively to God, for God is the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), and “There is nothing real but God.”

The most sophisticated and prolific theoretician of the Sufi tradition was Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), who likes to point out that dogmatic theologians, focusing on one apparent meaning of *tawḥīd*, come to the conclusion that God is radically other, dwelling in transcendence and “incomparability” (*tanzīh*). Sufis say the same thing, but they add that transcendence does not contradict immanence and “similarity” (*tashbīh*), for the law of noncontradiction pertains to the created realm, not to God, whose very incomparability demands that he be the coincidence of opposites (*jam’ al-aḍḍād*). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s view, scholastic theologians reject immanence because of their overreliance on reason (*‘aql*), the mental faculty that analyzes and systematizes. In contrast, Sufi teachers also use the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*), which, when cultivated and refined, provides access to “unveiling” or “mystical vision,” in which the divine face is seen to be actually present in phenomenal appearances. For Ibn ‘Arabī, true understanding of *tawḥīd* depends upon seeing with both eyes of the “heart” (*qalb*): the eye of reason and the eye of imagination.

Beginning with Avicenna (d. 1037), philosophers typically spoke of being or existence using the word *wujūd*. The existence of God is then necessary, and the existence of everything else is contingent upon God’s existence. The literal sense of *wujūd*, however, is “to find and to be aware of,” and the Koran mentions God as the subject of the verb, so theologians speak of God as *al-wājīd*, the Finder. As al-Ghazālī explains, God is “the Finder in an absolute sense, and anything else, even if it finds some of the attributes and causes of perfection, also lacks certain things, so it can only find in a relative sense.”³ In other words, *tawḥīd* demands that, as al-Ghazālī likes to put it, “There is nothing in *wujūd* but God.” This means not only that God’s Being is the only true and real being, but also that his finding – his consciousness and awareness – is the only true and real finding.

The notion that God’s Being is true and real and that its created analogues are “metaphors” (*majāz*) is a constant theme of Sufi teachings, whether or not the term *wujūd* is employed. Moreover, as the often quoted Arabic proverb puts it, “The metaphor is the bridge to the reality.” As seen by the Sufis, the universe is a transparent metaphor, which is to say that all phenomena point back to the noumena that are God’s most beautiful names. All things are theophanies or divine “self-disclosures” (*tajallī*), a term derived from the Koranic story of Moses. In truth, says Ibn ‘Arabī, all of reality is two: the

³ *al-Maqṣad al-asnāfi sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Fadlou A. Shehadi (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971), 143.

Real *Wujūd* that is God, and the metaphorical *wujūd* that is God's self-disclosure.

Ibn 'Arabī's stress on the dual implications of *tawhīd* – both transcendence and immanence – led Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the great Hanbali polemicist, to ascribe to him the notion of *wahdat al-wujūd*, "the oneness of Being," though Ibn 'Arabī never used the term. According to Ibn Taymiyya, this expression was outright unbelief, for it means that no distinction can be drawn between God and the cosmos. Everyone who took part in the heated debate that ensued (including Orientalists in modern times) has had in mind a specific meaning of *wahdat al-wujūd* and has assumed that Ibn 'Arabī spoke of it in that meaning. In fact, at least seven distinct meanings can be discerned in the literature.⁴ Few people actually took the trouble to read Ibn 'Arabī's books, not least because they are notoriously difficult. What becomes clear when one does delve into his writings is that he addressed the relationship between the Oneness of God and the manyness of the cosmos in scores of ways, none of which is reducible to a simple either/or statement. One of his refrains is "He/not He" (*huwa lā huwa*), a variant on the formula of *tawhīd*, "No god but He." Things, phenomena, contingent beings, creatures are "He" inasmuch as they partake of *wujūd*, but "not He" inasmuch as they are simply themselves. Everything is a commingling of real and unreal, being and nonexistence, light and darkness, necessity and contingency.

Ambiguity, in short, defines our cosmic situation. This is what Ibn 'Arabī and others mean when they say that the universe is *khayāl*, a word that means both imagination and image. All things are God's imagination – images of both Real Being and nothingness. Like reflections in a mirror, they are what they appear to be, but they are also something else. In Ibn 'Arabī's formulation, the rational eye of the heart thinks in terms of either/or, but the imaginal eye sees that things can simultaneously be and not be. Seeing with either eye alone distorts the vision of *tawhīd*, with its harmonious balance of transcendence and immanence. The general Sufi acknowledgment of cosmic ambiguity led to a vision of the cosmos as ranked in hierarchical degrees of intensity of *wujūd*. The basic insight is simply that some things are clearer images of the divine qualities than others – it is not a question of "yes or no" but rather "To what extent?"

The Koran refers to two basic realms of created existence, using terms such as unseen and visible, heaven and earth, high and low. Many Sufis and

⁴ See William Chittick, "Rūmī and *Wahdat al-wujūd*," in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam*, ed. A. Banani, R. Hovannisian, and G. Sabagh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70–111.

philosophers spent a good deal of effort explaining that these are not sharp dichotomies but designations for the extreme points on a spectrum. Some of them discussed a third, intermediate realm, often calling it by the Koranic expression "isthmus" (*barzakh*). Its outstanding characteristic is that it is neither heaven nor earth, neither spirit nor body, neither high nor low; rather, it is low in relation to heaven and high in relation to earth, gross in relation to spirit and subtle in relation to body. Thus, we commonly find a three-world scheme: the World of Spirits at one extreme, the World of Bodies at the other extreme, and the Isthmus or World of Images in between – what Henry Corbin labeled the *mundus imaginalis*. The overall picture is that the divine qualities are infinitely present in the Real Being, and their properties and traces become manifest in ever-decreasing levels of intensity, much as light diminishes as it recedes from its source. Things dwelling at each lower level make manifest, or act as symbols for, those dwelling at higher levels: "As above, so below."

That the lower discloses the properties of the higher accords with two of the implications of *tawhīd* mentioned in elementary Islamic catechisms: Everything comes from God, and everything is constantly sustained by God. The third implication is that everything goes back where it came from. God is the First and the Last. This going back is the already mentioned *ma'ād*, "return," the third of the three principles of faith. It helps explain why the first two principles, *tawhīd* and prophecy, are so important: Our response to them determines the trajectory of our ultimate encounter with the One: "As below, so above." We will go back to God in keeping with the manner in which we live our lives and shape our souls.

Philosophers commonly described the Return to God as the necessary outcome of a prior movement, called "the Origin" (*mabda*). Sufis used the same Koranic terminology, but they often preferred the word *qawsān*, which means "two bows" or "two arcs" (like Latin *arcus*, the word *qaws* means both bow and arc). The word derives from a Koranic verse that refers to the Prophet's proximity to God on his Night Journey: "He was two-bows-length away, or closer" (53:9). This is taken as an allusion to the fullness of human perfection that is reached when an individual, having descended into the world from God, returns voluntarily to him by achieving deiformity and becoming characterized by his traits. Through such a trajectory, man traverses the entire circle of existence and re-joins his Source.

Sufi theory also gives prominence to the notion of the universe as macrocosm (*al-'ālam al-kabīr*) and the human individual as microcosm (*al-'ālam al-ṣaghīr*). Both realms make manifest the same roots, for each is an all-embracing theophany, appearing in God's "form" (*ṣūra*). The macrocosm, however, is

relatively externalized, dispersed, and differentiated (*mufaṣṣal*), and the microcosm relatively internalized, focused, and undifferentiated (*mujmal*). In this anthropocosmic vision, the human subject takes as its object, at least potentially, the entire cosmos. Sufis see Koranic reference to this teaching in many passages, not least the Creation story, according to which God taught Adam “the names, all of them” (2:31). These are the names of all things, whether manifest or non-manifest, visible or unseen, even of God himself. To say that Adam – a word that the Koran uses generically for human beings – was taught the names implies that awareness of God and the universe is innate to the human substance, no matter how obscured it may have become by the forgetfulness (*nisyān*) that is endemic to mankind ever since “Adam forgot” (Koran 20:115). The role of the prophets is “to remind” (*dhikr, tadhkira*), that is, to guide people in remembering what they already know because of their primordial nature (*fiṭra*), created in God’s form.

The cosmos in its entirety is a self-disclosure of Being, an image of Infinity; it is what Ibn ‘Arabī calls “Nondelimited Imagination.” The *mundus imaginis* discussed by Corbin is then the intermediary cosmic realm, situated between the intense luminosity of the spirits and the darkness of the bodies. In a similar way, the microcosm has three levels: spirit (*rūḥ*), soul (*nafs*), and body (*badan*). The soul is the isthmus between consciousness and forgetfulness, the image of light and darkness, life and death, activity and inertia. The human drama plays out in the soul, not in the spirit or body, for it is constantly pulled in two directions – upward toward greater awareness and downward toward deeper forgetfulness. The Persian poet Rūmī (d. 1273) offers some of the most down-to-earth depictions of this internal struggle in Sufi literature, as when he says, “The states of human beings are as if an angel’s wing were stuck on a donkey’s tail so that perhaps the donkey, through the radiance and companionship of the angel, might itself become an angel.”⁵

Having descended into manifestation, the microcosm, unlike the macrocosm, is forced to take into account its own free will, however limited this may be. People have no choice but to return to God, because everyone dies and is resurrected, but their freedom to choose plays a major role in determining the manner in which they will experience posthumous becoming. Failure to make the right choices can lead to indefinite misery (although many Sufi authors, in contrast to the exoteric theologians, say that hell’s suffering – as opposed to hell itself – cannot be everlasting).⁶

⁵ *Fīhi mā fīhi*, ed. B. Furūzānfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), 107.

⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī provides numerous arguments to prove the point. For a few of them, see William Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), ch. 9.

The function of the prophets is to guide people in making the choices that lead to a happy return. The divine root of prophecy is the name Guide (*al-hādī*), one of the many contrasting names of the Godhead. Its correlative is the name Misguider (*al-mudīll*), the most salient cosmic manifestation of which is Satan.⁷ As in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm: People encounter the conflicting claims of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. The general Sufi position is that no one can tread the labyrinth of moral and cosmic ambiguity and achieve the goal of human life – transformation and deformity – without prophetic guidance. Muslims are called specifically to follow Muhammad and climb the ladder in his footsteps.

Here a major discussion enters the picture, that of “the perfect human being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), an ideal type embodied first and foremost by Muhammad and then by other prophets. There are numerous sides to the issue. Ibn ‘Arabī’s voluminous discussions of metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual psychology can best be understood as an attempt to describe the full parameters of human perfection. Among the many prominent issues he and others address is the relationship between the prophets (*nabī*), the last of whom was Muhammad, and the “friends” (*walī*), those who achieve nearness to God by conforming to the prophetic model (the translation of this word as “saint” is problematic).⁸

4 Climbing the Ladder

The Sufis wrote myriad volumes on theory, and perhaps even more on practice. Sufi institutions – the so-called “orders” (*ṭarīqa*, literally, “paths”) – began developing around the sixth/twelfth century and eventually spread throughout the Islamic world, always adapted to local circumstances. If esotericism is understood as something exclusive to initiates, and exotericism as suitable for the general public, then the weight of Islamic history suggests that later Sufism has been more exoteric than esoteric, for its teachings about interiority were assimilated into the most popular forms of religiosity. One can also say that in many cases, Sufi orders turned into a sort

⁷ Some of the more interesting esoteric interpretations of Satan are provided by Sufis such as the famous al-Ḥallāj. See Peter J. Awn, *Satan’s Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983). On Ibn ‘Arabī’s views, see William Chittick, “Iblīs and the Jinn in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*,” *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms: Festschrift for Wolfhart Heinrichs on His 65th Birthday*, ed. Beatrice Gruendler and Michael Cooperson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 99–126.

⁸ A closely related discussion has to do with the relationship between “the Seal of the Prophets” (Muhammad) and “the Seal of the Friends.” On this see Michel Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

of exoteric esotericism, and Sufi literature is full of criticisms of teachers who preserved the trappings of Sufism but lacked the prerequisite personal transformation. For similar reasons, calling Sufism “mysticism” is problematic, given that a mystic should be someone who has actually achieved some sort of divine intimacy or inner illumination. The vast majority of those affiliated with Sufi orders, however, are simply striving on the path, acknowledging that God’s friends alone deserve to share in the divine mysteries. This is one reason why they have rarely referred to themselves as “Sufis,” for, in most definitions, the word designates a high station of spiritual realization. Rather, they call themselves “the poor” (Arabic *faqīr*, Persian *darwīsh*). The expression is Koranic: “O people, you are the poor toward God, and God is the Rich, the Praiseworthy” (35:15).

In almost every case, the Sufi orders trace their origin by a chain of transmission (*silsila*) back to Muhammad. The Sufi teachers, commonly known as “elders” (*shaykh*, *pīr*) or “spiritual guides” (*murshid*), initiate disciples by means of a ritual, again going back to the Prophet, called “the swearing allegiance of good-pleasure” (*bay‘at al-riḍwān*, alluded to in Koran 48:10). Sufi teachers also transmit specific practices, the most common of which is the “invocation” (*dhikr*) of a divine name or a Koranic formula. The word literally means reminder, remembrance, and mention; it is used in the Koran to designate not only the practice of invoking God’s name but also the function of prophecy itself – “reminding” people of their rootedness in God. In communal meetings, Sufis engage in rituals centering on the recitation of Koranic verses and divine names (and rarely involving anything that might be called “dancing”). All of this is “esoteric” only in the sense that not all Muslims participate.

The notion that Sufism adds a dimension to ordinary, exoteric observance of Islam is found in the common teaching that there are three basic components of the Islamic tradition: the Shariah or revealed law; the Tariqah (*tariqa*) or Sufi path; and the Haqiqah (*haqiqah*) or “Reality,” which is the source and goal of both Shariah and Tariqah. The Reality, in other words, is God himself, who revealed the Koran so that people could climb the ladder back to him in the footsteps of the Prophet.

Sufi writings call the final goal of the path – reaching the Reality – by many names and describe the process in numerous ways. All such works focus on overcoming the distance demanded by God’s transcendence, and this helps explain the hostility toward Sufism that has often appeared among the exoterically minded jurists and theologians. According to al-Ghazālī and many others, the goal is simply the full actualization of *tawhīd*. He explains this in his grand summa of the spirit of Islamic practice, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*,

“Revivifying the Sciences of the Religion”: *Tawhīd*, he says, has four levels. The first is to utter the formula “No god but God,” while the heart is heedless of its meaning. The second is to acknowledge its truth, as in the belief of the common people. The third is to witness its truth by way of unveiling, as in the case of those brought near to God. The fourth is to see nothing in *wujūd* (existence, consciousness) but the One – this, he tells us, is what the Sufis mean when they speak of “annihilation” (*fanā*) in *tawhīd*.⁹

Al-Ghazālī’s reference to four levels of *tawhīd* follows the standard model of the ladder ascended by the Prophet. Discussion of the ladder’s rungs – sometimes enumerated as 7, 10, 100, 300, or even 1001 – makes up a common genre of Sufi literature. A famous example is *Mantiq al-ṭayr*, “The Language of the Birds,” by the Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221), in which a group of birds flies over seven mountains and achieves final union with its king. Each of the mountains – called seeking, love, recognition, independence, unity, bewilderment, and poverty – represents a transformation of the soul and a stage in becoming characterized by divine traits.

5 Conclusion

The distinction between the exoteric path of the jurists and theologians and the esoteric path of the Sufis can perhaps best be reduced to the focus on transformation, or to the notion that true understanding comes only through active and conscious participation in the very reality of the divine consciousness. This is why the two approaches have often been differentiated in terms of two basic sorts of knowledge: transmitted (*naqlī*) and intellectual (*‘aqlī*). Transmitted knowledge underlies all learning, since it is the source of language, grammar, social norms, and, in the specifically Islamic context, the Koran and the Hadith. As for intellectual knowing, it is the consciousness of Reality, or a direct awareness of the way things are – *ma’rifā*, “self-recognition,” a word often translated as “*gnosis*.” This term’s most often cited *locus classicus* is the Prophet’s purported saying, “He who recognizes himself recognizes his Lord.”

The distinction between these two sorts of knowledge is implicit in al-Ghazālī’s four levels of *tawhīd*. The first and second are based on what is technically called *taqlīd*, imitation, that is, following the authority of the transmitted learning. The third and fourth depend on inner transformation,

⁹ *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 1993), vol. 4, 359. For a free translation of the passage, see David Burrell, *Al-Ghazali: Faith in Divine Unity & Trust in Divine Providence* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2001), 10ff.

or what is called *tahqīq*, realization. The word *tahqīq* derives from the same root as *ḥaqq* and *Haqiqah* (*ḥaqīqa*). As a Koranic divine name, *al-ḥaqq* designates the real, the true, the worthy; *Haqiqah*, as noted, designates the origin and final goal of both the *Shariah* and the *Tariqah*. As for *tahqīq*, it means to establish and actualize what is real, true, and worthy, that is, to attain to the *Haqiqah*. Once realization has been achieved, there can be no more talk of imitation, for the distinction between knower and known has been effaced.

Sufi authors provide numerous depictions of the transformed selfhoods achieved by the friends of God. Ibn 'Arabī often calls the highest level of human perfection "the station of no station" (*maqām lā maqām*), because it represents the full realization of all divine attributes and character traits. Like the Divine Essence, this supreme stage cannot be designated by any specific name. Here are brief excerpts from his discussions:

The people of perfection have realized all stations and states and passed beyond them to the station above both majesty and beauty, so they have no attributes and no description. It was said to Abū Yazīd, "How are you this morning?" He replied, "I have no morning and no evening; morning and evening belong to him who becomes delimited by attributes, and I have no attributes."¹⁰

The highest of all human beings are those who have no station, because the stations determine the properties of those who stand within them. But without doubt, the highest of all groups themselves determine the properties – they are not determined by properties. They are the divine ones, for the Real is identical with them.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Cairo: 1911), vol. 2, 133.

¹¹ Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, vol. 3, 506. For these two passages and several more along with a discussion of their significance in the context of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings, see William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), ch. 20.