



**Understanding Sufism: Contextualising the Content**

**By**

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## Abstract

This thesis addresses the problem of how to interpret Islamic writers without imposing generic frameworks of later and partly Western derivation. It questions the overuse of the category “Sufism” which has sometimes been deployed to read anachronistic concerns into Islamic writers. It does so by a detailed study of some of the key works of the 13th century writer Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah (d. 709/1309). In this way it fills a gap in the learned literature in two ways. Firstly, it examines the legitimacy of prevalent conceptualisations of the category “Sufism.” Secondly, it examines the work of one Sufi thinker, and asks in what ways, if any, Western categories may tend to distort its Islamic characteristics. The methodology of the thesis is primarily exegetical, although significant attention is also paid to issues of context.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part One sets up the problem of Sufism as an organizational category in the literature. In doing so, this part introduces the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, and justifies the selection from his works for the case study in Part Two. Part Two provides a detailed case study of the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. It opens with some of the key issues involved in understanding an Islamic thinker, and gives a brief overview of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s life. This is followed by an examination of materials on topics such as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, eschatology, ethics, and soteriology. In each case it is suggested that these topics may be misleading unless care is taken not to import Western conceptuality where it is not justified by the texts. Emphasis is placed on the soteriological character of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s writings, to which the Western terms “theology” and “philosophy” are only partly appropriate. Part Two concludes with a short study of the interaction between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya designed to illustrate how a less Western conceptual approach may modify aspects of the existing reception of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s thought.

The central point of the thesis is that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah needs to be reread, taking more account of the Islamic contexts of his work. The thesis does not pretend to settle every issue of interpretation and it only deals with some of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s texts. In arguing for contextual Islamic approaches to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah as opposed to the more standard generic readings, such as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah as “Sufi” or “philosopher,” the thesis raises issues relevant not only to Islamic studies, but also to studies in comparative religion generally. While limited by its focus on only one writer, it hopefully may stimulate further research into how Islamic writers may best be

studied in ways which respects their religious commitments, while acknowledging the need to relate their work to concepts of Western origin.

## Acknowledgements

This work represents part of a personal journey, both inner and outer, that has been rife with trials and successes. While the trials have been my own, the successes that have come are due in no small part to those who have travelled with me. While there are too many to acknowledge individually, I am grateful for their company along this path.

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## Part I

### Chapter 1 - Introduction

The problem of Sufism's relation to Islam has a long history both within the works of Muslim scholars throughout the history of Islam and within the works of modern scholars who have attempted to survey the field. Sufism's relation to Islam has often evoked two diametrically opposed positions, on the one hand of those who posit Sufism as something foreign to and outside of Islam and, on the other hand, those who posit that Sufism is an integral aspect of Islam.

This thesis problematises generic understandings of "Sufism" and exemplifies a more contextual approach by an in depth study of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the problems with the categorisation of Sufism. The second part is a study of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre in order to evaluate a) the interrelations between his works and b) what, if any, are the relations to and affirmations of an Islamic paradigm. This work can be situated amongst emerging studies which are acknowledging the limited and limiting approaches that have tended to impose alien frameworks on works that are deemed foreign, both linguistically and culturally.

Part two of this work has a tiered structure. Each chapter, while focusing on one aspect of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's work, acts as the basis for each successive chapter. The chapters are arranged to facilitate a highlighting of the interconnections within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works between domains. This part, as explained later, will utilise the concept of provision (*rizq*) as an entry point to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works. The goal is to show that the interconnections between Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works are not limited to certain topics.

Part two opens with a chapter introducing Ibn 'Ata' Allah and his works. This chapter places Ibn 'Ata' Allah within his historical context, through an overview of his life, while also providing his historical and transhistorical importance. This chapter also looks at some of the issues that arise within Sufi studies, such as Qur'anic hermeneutics and the science of Prophethood, and determines how these could be dealt with in the study that follows.

The fourth chapter examines Ibn 'Ata' Allah's use of the Oneness of God (*tawhid*) as a metaphysical principle. Through examining his analysis of the Islamic affirmation of Oneness (*kalimah tawhid*) "there is no god but Allah" (*la ilaha illa'llah*) it will be shown that, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *tawhid* is the only viable and sound basis for metaphysics. It will be seen, in turn, that the problem of *rizq* is a direct result of this metaphysical scheme. Thus, the domain of metaphysics is seen to be the source of the problem of *rizq*. It will be shown that the metaphysical consistency throughout his works is applied in varying ways when developing, analysing, and solving the problem of *rizq*.

The fifth chapter examines the ontological implications of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's metaphysics and how, within this domain, the problem of *rizq* takes prominence. As provision occurs within the ontological domain, this domain is seen to be the site of the problem of *rizq*. One of the themes explored, which arises as a consequence of his metaphysics, is ontological poverty (*faqr*). If Allah is the principle of existence then everything other than Allah, being contingently existent, has ontological dependence. This raises the issue of an evident relation between ontological poverty (*faqr*) and selfish calculation (*tadbir*). It will be shown that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's argument against acting according to one's selfish desires is, in some ways, an argument against acting contrary to *tawhid*.

The sixth chapter examines the epistemological impact of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's metaphysics and ontology. The move towards the realisation of creation's ontological poverty will be shown to be achieved through an ever increasing awareness of Divine Unity within/underpinning multiplicity. The epistemological domain is the location of the solution to the problem of *rizq*. Here it will be seen that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's epistemology is an extension of his metaphysics and ontology.

The seventh chapter delves into the eschatological issues that, within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, can be seen to result from the problem of *rizq*. From an eschatological perspective, the problem of *rizq* is both widened and problematised. It is widened in that the problem of *rizq* is seen to be an aspect of the overarching soteriological concern for both this world and the next. The problem of *rizq* is, however, problematised in that in being a concern of gaining provision for the next world, the provision of this world is forgone in preference for the next. This is

problematic in as far as it is seen to be antithetical to the issues detailed in the preceding chapters. Irrespective of the domain that one is concerned with, the problem of *rizq* can be seen to have a pedagogical function in that it provides impetus for the individual for pursuing both this world and the next.

The eighth chapter examines the moral implications of embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid* and the implications this has for the problem of *rizq*. It will be shown that through the perfection of ethical behaviour (*adab*), as Ibn 'Ata' Allah encourages, the metaphysics of *tawhid* becomes embodied. Here it will be seen that it is within the ethical domain that the solution to the problem of *rizq* is enacted.

The ninth chapter focuses on the individual's soteriological development through overcoming the problem of *rizq* and embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*. While his soteriological semiotics is alluded to throughout this work, due to its centrality, its analysis is held over until this chapter. There are two reasons for this, a) an understanding of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's worldview is indispensable for understanding his views on soteriology and b) it is here that the importance of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics for resolving the problem of *rizq* becomes apparent.

The tenth chapter takes a differing approach to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's dependence on an Islamic paradigm. This chapter examines the well known, though little commented on, relationship between Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya is renowned for, amongst other things, his criticisms of what he saw as heterodox practices of many Sufis. The degree to which Ibn 'Ata' Allah adhered to an Islamic paradigm can be examined through his responses to these criticisms.

Throughout this analysis of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre his use of the Qur'an and the Hadith, as the foundational texts of Islam, is foregrounded. There are instances, however, where verses of the Qur'an and Hadith have been included because they are a) alluded to in a manner familiar to those familiar with these sources or b) illustrate his consistency with these sources when they are not mentioned. This has been done in order to show the degree to which Ibn 'Ata' Allah, and those thinkers like him, depends on an inherently Islamic context for understanding their works.

## ***The Transmission of Sufism***

The transmission of Sufism into Europe has a long history. It began in earnest in the Middle Ages with the translation of Islamic texts into Latin and has continued since then with varying degrees of intensity. The colonisation of Muslim countries that occurred from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward saw a renewed interest in attempts to understand a doctrine that appears both foreign and familiar. Orientalists attempted to chart the major thinkers and foregrounded what they saw as the major texts. Subsequently, an extensive scholarly literature emerged in several European languages.

Nonetheless, this literature is not without its biases. This bias has shifted over time. The medieval translations were almost exclusively works of science or philosophy. Aside from issues of translation, which were often very problematic with a marked tendency to Latinise Semitic expressions, these works were often divorced from their Islamic context. The problem was arguably exacerbated by European colonialism with its sense of superiority. In the case of Sufism, Orientalists identified bodies of material they valorised as important but then often highlighted the similarities in content and sophistication of certain aspects of Islamic thought with the European intellectual heritage. This was often done at the expense of the inherently Islamic nature and context of the works concerned. Attention to sources sometimes made Sufism a patchwork of Greek, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian philosophy, only loosely connected with the Qur'an. While this, to some degree, resulted from some Islamic scholars of Sufism Islamicising non-Islamic materials and then developed readings of Sufism based on their own specific interpretations of what is and what is not Islam, it does not account for the degree to which some Sufi works have been divorced from an Islamic context. Clearly "Sufism" needs to be conceptualised in clearer and more critical terms and without reference to essentialist conceptions of either Greek philosophy (which was also very diverse and historically variable) or a narrow reductionist view of Islam.

## ***Limitations***

A prominent issue that frequently arises within works on Sufism is an insufficient contextualisation of the materials. This can result in studies that deny the possibility of Sufism being indigenous to Islamic paradigms as well as studies that deny the possibility of influences external to Islam on particular Sufi literature or practices. As a result, there is some confusion about what the terms “Sufi” and “Sufism” cover. In following the twofold aim, this work uses a strategy that consists of two movements. Firstly, in order to determine whether or not Sufism is indigenous to Islam, it assumes that there is an integral relation between Sufism and an Islamic paradigm. Secondly, in order to test this assumption, an analysis of the works of one individual who is regarded as an important Sufi thinker is undertaken to determine if there are correlations or disjunctions between their work and an Islamic paradigm. For this study, the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah have been chosen. In breaking down Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview into various domains, the strategy has been to examine his views and then to determine how consistent they are with the foundational texts of Islam.

Focusing on the works of one thinker opens this work to certain limitations. While this has the benefit of limiting the scope of the work, it also limits the any generalisations that may be made within the fields of Islamic or Sufi studies. As a result, caution must be exercised when presenting evidence for Sufism’s relation to Islamic paradigms. Care is also needed in handling the issue of Islamic orthodoxy. It is important both to avoid reading in a single interpretation of what Islam is and not to negate the plurality that exists within any tradition.<sup>1</sup> Here views will be said to be compatible with Islamic paradigms when there is evidence that can be read to support them within the Qur’an or the Hadith. It should also be noted that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work is presented for the Western educated reader and is organised in terms of categories drawn from the Western philosophical tradition, categories which were not, of course, deployed by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah himself. This is a standard practice in the field, but it means that nuances are called for. In some cases the Arabic meaning is difficult to convey in Western terms.

Given the aim of this work of examining the relation of Sufism to Islam, this work is open to a criticism of the division of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview in accordance with categories generally associated with what may be called the Western philosophical tradition. While it would be a

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<sup>1</sup> For a tradition that bases itself on the affirmation of the Onenes of God (*tawhid*), the idea of a plurality of interpretations is not as controversial as it might seem, as is evinced by the four schools of Sunni law.

stretch to state that “Arabic literature is boring unless it bears a family resemblance to European literature,”<sup>2</sup> it is acknowledged that there is some necessity for what Kilito terms “cultural translation.” It is hoped that in the current study it may be regarded as “a praiseworthy pedagogical operation” in as far as “it is based on a sense of openness and respect for the Other and [one’s] cultural frame of reference.”<sup>3</sup> As Kilito states,<sup>4</sup> cultural translation “which is widely followed by scholars” is not necessarily innocent, for it can often obscure that which is “translated” both intentionally and unintentionally. It is for this reason that it is openly acknowledged that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah did not utilise categories such as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, etc. and that the division of his worldview, as presented in his existent works, into these categories is, while useful for this study, somewhat arbitrary. If we take, as an example, soteriology as a category, then two comments can be made highlighting the manner in which cultural translation can be deemed a hinderance. Firstly, as will become apparent from the study below, it would not be incorrect to state that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre does not have a metaphysics or an ontology or an epistemology, each of his works are focused solely on soteriological matters. If elements of these others categories are to be found, as has been suggested in each chapter, then they exist in so far as they serve Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological concerns. Secondly, it could also be stated that, strictly speaking, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not have a soteriology. Given the etymology and philological development of “soteriology” and its relationship to salvation, saviour, and, by extension, redemption from sin, then “soteriology” can be seen to have inherently Christian underpinnings. If this is accepted as the case, then it would be an imposition on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview to state that each of his works are focused solely on soteriological matters. With these concerns in mind, the categories upon which each chapter is based are utilised in as far as they provide a useful means for highlighting certain aspects of the works discussed with a desire to show “openness and respect for the Other and [one’s] cultural frame of reference.”<sup>5</sup>

## ***Problematizing “Sufism”***

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<sup>2</sup> Abdelfattah Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, trans. Wail S. Hassan (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 15

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The history of Sufism as a category of academic study has a rich history. Some of the earliest studies on Sufism can be found in the works of Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville (1625-1695), a French Orientalist, François Bernier (1625-1688), a French physician and traveller, and François Pétis de la Croix (1653-1713), a French Orientalist and diplomat. As early as the Seventeenth century, in the works of these individuals, there emerged two trends that continue to impact the field of Sufi studies: academic/scholarly studies, which analysed primary texts, and anthropological studies, which documented particular expressions of Sufism. In examining a range of these early studies it has been said that they are marked by:

*A discipline that started as a first and foremost philological, text-centred exercise gradually evolved into a subdivision of "cross-religious" studies pursued by curious amateurs (diplomats, travellers, colonial officials), Biblicists, and area studies specialists, or "Orientalists."*<sup>6</sup>

The legacy of these early studies is twofold.

Firstly there is the legacy for works that are primarily academic. Often coming from scholars of the Bible and Orientalists, "authors of such works were reluctant to consider mystical propensities to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion."<sup>7</sup> Intentionally or not, these authors often "viewed Islam as inferior to Christianity," the result of which was a prevailing view that Islam was "incapable of producing the vaulted spirituality and sophisticated theology they observed in Sufi texts."<sup>8</sup> Thus, despite any conclusive evidence to support it, Sufism was seen as being extrinsic to Islam. The severity of this can be seen in the fact that all major histories of Islam published in Europe between 1850 and 1890 "tended to draw a sharp distinction between Sufism and mainstream Islam."<sup>9</sup> Despite no such sharp distinction being apparent within the anthropological literature of the time, there are numerous examples that attempt to show Sufism's alleged Hindu, neo-Platonic, Christian, or other origin, a trend that continues within modern academic literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander D. Knysh. "Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West," in *A Companion to the History of the Middle East*, ed. Youssef M. Choueiri (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 109.



Secondly there is the legacy for works that are primarily anthropological. The “empirical” data of these early anthropological studies are often mired in the colonialist perspectives of the observers. This literature has been seen to be predominantly produced by “colonial administrators who presided over the conquest and ‘pacification’ of indigenous Muslim populations” and, as such,

*the data that its authors perceived to be ‘authentic’ and ‘objective’ is, in fact, permeated by underlying colonial and imperial assumptions and stereotypes about the Muslim societies in question.*<sup>10</sup>

This inherent bias has been documented in works produced by the French and British,<sup>11</sup> the Russians,<sup>12</sup> and the Dutch,<sup>13</sup> though without exhausting such instances.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars tested the views of their predecessors. A primary concern for “all these scholars ... [was] to identify the place of Sufi teachings, literature, and practices vis-à-vis ‘orthodox’ Islam.”<sup>14</sup> Indicative of the scholarship of this era is the work of Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) who presented the view that “Sufi exegetes embraced the allegorical method of Qur’an interpretation, which set them apart from the ‘mainstream’ Sunni commentators who focused on the historical, legal and philological aspects of the Muslim scripture.”<sup>15</sup> While views such as this placed Sufism within an Islamic paradigm, it did so at the expense of placing it in opposition to Islamic thinkers and works that were deemed “mainstream,” “popular,” and, ultimately, “orthodox.” In accounting for a supposed “otherness” within Sufi teachings, literature, and practices, many scholars continued to assert foreign sources and influences. Despite any conclusive evidence for this view, it can be seen to

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander D. Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm: The Issue of Motivations of Sufi Resistance Movements in Western and Russian Scholarship,” *Die Welt des Islams* 42 (2002): 140.

<sup>11</sup> Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm”; Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies.”

<sup>12</sup> Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm”.

<sup>13</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Studies of Sufism and Sufi Orders in Indonesia,” *Die Welt des Islams* 38 (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

be a result of a late nineteenth century shift in the academic study of religion where “the project of developing a scientific study of religion was framed in a quest of origins.”<sup>16</sup>

The early twentieth century witnessed a rapid expansion in the number of scholars and works specialising in Sufi studies. However, these often continued the biases of their predecessors, as it has been noted “by building on the foundations established by a handful of nineteenth-century pioneers, their twentieth-century successors generated a considerable body of academic literature.”<sup>17</sup> The anthropological approach continued to frame its observations in accordance with questionable agendas as “the field data assembled by colonial administrators-cum-scholars was definitely shaped by their colonial and imperial presuppositions and anxieties.”<sup>18</sup> During this period, within academic approaches to Sufi studies “there emerged two major approaches to Sufism in western scholarship.”<sup>19</sup> Without necessarily negating each other, a “historicist” approach emerged, which “emphasised the concrete circumstances of Sufism’s evolution across time and space,” as well as a “trans-historical,” which viewed the contents of Sufism as consistently emphasising “the eternal human aspiration to a higher reality and to a unitive/monistic vision of the world.”<sup>20</sup> As the study of the trans-historical aspect of Sufism attracted “researchers who were similarly committed to a religious vocation,” some critics of the literature of this era have noticed “a ‘Christianisation’ of some aspects of Sufi thought.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the works produced during this period of scholarship “laid solid textual and factual foundations for the study of Sufism in western academia.”<sup>22</sup>

Second half of the twentieth century saw a shift in focus within religious studies. The shift being referred to here is largely due to the critique of Orientalism and the rise of post-Orientalist and

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<sup>16</sup> Marcia Hermansen. “The Academic Study of Sufism in American Universities,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Studies* 24 (2007): 29.

<sup>17</sup> Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 118.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> Hermansen, “The Academic Study of Sufism,” 30.

<sup>22</sup> Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi Studies,” 121.

postcolonial approaches to the academic study of the world's religions.<sup>23</sup> With regard to the field of Sufi studies

*one can say that Sufi studies have successfully survived the critique of western "Orientalism" launched in the 1960s and 1970s by Abdul Latif Tibawi and Edward Said, who indicted its representatives for their "complicity" with the western colonial project and the resultant "deliberate distortion" of Islam's image in the west.*<sup>24</sup>

However, unpacking a definition of having "successfully survived" this critique can be taken to mean that very little has changed, for "overall we find surprisingly little 'soul-searching' among the western 'Sufiologists' of the last decades of the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup> Examples of this can be seen in the two articles that specifically deal with Sufi materials within *Rethinking Islamic Studies*,<sup>26</sup> both of which deal specifically with postcolonialist approaches to the position of hagiographical materials within academic discourse without touching on the contextualisation of Sufism and the potential impact that this may have for scholarly studies.

The problem of contextualising Sufism can be seen to arise from two distinct, though interrelated, areas of scholarship. Firstly there is a general problem of cultural translation that arises within comparative philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and any form of cross-cultural hermeneutics. It is recognised that "comparative philosophy often imports hermeneutical and philosophical methods to the study of non-Western texts that succeed in distorting or simply missing the significance of those texts ... in the context of their home cultures"<sup>27</sup> such that there is a "dramatic distortion of alien traditions through the imposition of hermeneutic and

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<sup>23</sup> It should be recognised that to delve into the wealth of postcolonial literature would take this work too far afield. Varying responses abound regarding the benefits and limitations of this work. Without detailing them and without siding with either camp, it is interesting to acknowledge that "it has become commonplace within postcolonial studies to lament the colonizing propensities of postcolonial studies" Donald R. Wehrs. "Satre's Legacy in Postcolonial Theory; or, Who's Afraid of Non-Western Historiography and Cultural Studies," *New Literary History* 34 (2004): 761.

<sup>24</sup> Knysh, "Historiography of Sufi Studies," 121.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds., *Rethinking Islamic Studies* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.

doxographic frameworks ... entirely foreign to the traditions themselves.”<sup>28</sup> This distortion becomes increasingly dramatic when it is acknowledge that “many early Western studies or religion carried with them European ideas and presuppositions of what religion was or ought to be.”<sup>29</sup> This scholarly imperialism raises concerns that “asymmetrical translations and transcreations of non-Western texts displace the indigenous understanding by reframing and reencoding the signs precisely within a Euro-centred imaging or the world whose cognitive claims are derived from the historical experiences of European (modernist) cultures.”<sup>30</sup> These are issues that are being examined in relations to several of the world’s traditions, including, though not limited to Indian Philosophies,<sup>31</sup> Judaism,<sup>32</sup> and Islam.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the study provided here, it is intended that, by attempting to explore the internal logic of the texts, insight can be made by judging the materials according to their own claims.

The second area where the problem of contextualisation arises is within Sufi studies. This can be seen as being an example of the problematic nature of a practical implication of cross-cultural translation. As is discussed in the next chapter, the study of Sufism suffers from methods of categorisation that impose upon it ill fitting constraints that are, at times, at conflict with the claims and internal logic of the materials. One example, explored further below, is that of categorising Sufism as a form of mysticism. While this type of categorisation does give it “a family resemblance to European literature,”<sup>34</sup> it does so at the expense of limiting, to the point of negating, the paradigm which “Sufi” works claim as the underpinning framework.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>29</sup> Purushottama Bilimoria, “What is the ‘Subaltern’ of the Philosophy of Religion?,” in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 10 – 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>31</sup> See Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, eds., *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> See Peter Schafer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> See Ernst and Martin, *Rethinking Islamic Studies*.

<sup>34</sup> Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak*, 15.

## ***The Works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah***

Although almost all of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works have been translated into one or another European language, especially English and French, an analysis of the connections between his works remains undeveloped. In his introduction to the first complete English translation<sup>35</sup> of the *Kitab al-Hikam* from the original Arabic, Danner wrote:

*His principal work is of course the Kitab al-Hikam ... It was immediately successful and is considered by subsequent generations as a masterful summary, in easily learned aphorisms, of the truths of the Path.*

*Next in importance to the Hikam is his work Miftah al-falah wa misbah al-arwah (“The Key of Success and the Lamps of Spirits”), a concise and comprehensive exposition of the Sufi method of Invocation (dhikr). It is perhaps the first work in Sufism that gives the general and technical aspects of the dhikr in a single book. A short book, the Miftah is written in a lucid style replete with citations drawn from the Quran and Hadiths, not to mention the early Sufis. It was written in the last decade or so of his life and is quite popular in present-day Sufi circles.*

*A companion-piece to the Hikam is his Kitab at-Tanwir fi isqat at-tadbir (“Light on the Elimination of Self-Direction”), which is a simple and clear exposition of the Shadhili approach to the virtues, such as patience, sincerity, hope, love, fear, and the like. But they are all seen as contained in a single synthetic virtue, which is that of “the elimination of self-direction” (isqat at-tadbir). It is a question of the disciple’s aligning his own tadbir with that of God’s. The book ends in a series of intimate discourses (munajat) of rare beauty on the matter of tadbir. Since the work contains a reference to the great Tunisian Sufi, Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Marjani (d. 699/1299), followed by the usual formula for the deceased, we may conclude that it was*

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<sup>35</sup> Victor Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973). The first English translation of the *Kitab al-Hikam* was a partial translation from a Malay translation, see Raymond L. Archer, “Muhammadan Mysticism in Sumatra” (PhD diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1935). A second partial translation, and perhaps the first directly from Arabic, can be found in Ralph W. J. Austin, “Counsels of a Sufi Master,” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 5 (1971): 207 – 215.

written in the last decade of Ibn 'Ata'illah's life. The book abounds in citations from the first two masters of the Shadhiliyya.

His biographical work, *Kitab al-Lata'if fi manaqib Abi l-'Abbas al-Mursi wa Shaykhihi Abi l Hasan* ("The Subtle Blessings in the Saintly Lives of Abu l-'Abbas al-Mursi and His Master Abu l-Hassan"), is not so much a reconstruction of their lives as it is a record of what they said. It is somewhat autobiographical in that it has numerous references to the religious and Sufi notables of Ibn 'Ata'illah's time. Without the *Lata'if*, it would be practically impossible to say more than a few lines on the life of Ibn 'Ata'illah himself. This work is important for its transmission of the observations of the first masters of the Shadhiliyya, and as such is one of the basic sources for the early period of that order. All future works from Shadhili masters invariably refer to the *Lata'if* for their citations. Apart from its straightforward prose, it contains numerous *ahzab* from the Shadhili masters. It seems to be amongst his last compositions.

His small work, *al-Qasd al-mujarrad fi ma'rifat al-Isim al-Mufrad* ("The Pure Goal Concerning Knowledge of the Unique Name"), is likewise written in sober style. It sets out the doctrine of the Supreme Name, Allah, both in itself and in relation to the other Divine Names of God in Islam. There is a veritable metaphysical theory linking all of his exposition of the Divine Names. The *Qasd* is not as well known as his previous works, but it figures as part and parcel of the corpus that was handed down as coming from him. Its date of composition is difficult to assess.

His other writings are of minor importance, even though one of them, the *Taj al-arus al-hawi li-tahdhib an-nufus* ("The Bride's Crown Containing the Discipline of Souls"), seems still to be quite popular. Composed largely of extracts from his *Hikam*, *Tanwir*, and *Lata'if*, it is a composite work, and this may account for its popularity. It might have been composed by him as a memory aid or a brief synthesis of his other works, but it definitely lacks any interior unity. This might well be one of his last writings.

Apart from the aforementioned titles, Ibn 'Ata'illah's remaining compositions, such as his *Unwan at-tawfiq fi adab at-tariq* ("The Sign of Success Concerning the Discipline of the Path"), a gloss on a poem by Abu

*Madyan on the relations between master and disciple, as less well known. Of his lost works we have only titles.*<sup>36</sup>

This account of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s main works overlooks their interconnections. While it is mentioned that the *Kitab at-Tanwir* is “a companion-piece to the *Hikam*,” that aphorisms from the *Hikam* occur within other works, and that, when read in conjunction with the *Hikam*, “the other books of Ibn ‘Ata’illah, such as the *Tanwir*, the *Qasd*, the *Lata’if*, and the *Miftah*, open up still further angles of insight,” it concludes that “the *Hikam* itself, when properly understood and assimilated, ends up by being its own best commentary.”<sup>37</sup> This overlooks any further interconnections between these texts. Most subsequent studies have almost uncritically accepted and utilised the above passage, as can be seen within Appendix 1. Furthermore, a summation such as this does not attempt to contextualise those works which means that a key aspect to comprehending them is missing. This work draws predominantly from the literature in English and French.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, no attempt is made to delve into manuscripts or examine the large body of traditional commentary literature.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 12 – 14. This Passage, with minor variations, is also in Victor Danner, *The Book of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 29 – 32.

<sup>37</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Apart from the fact that many of the secondary materials in Arabic are not available in translation, this work does not engage with disputes and issues of translation of the original Arabic sources, which falls within the domain of Classical Arabic studies.

<sup>39</sup> Arguably the most famous commentaries on the *Kitab al-Hikam* are works by Ibn Abbad al-Ronda (8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century), Ahmad Zarruq (9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century), and Ibn Ajiba (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century). That this literature too has been largely ignored by scholars is discussed by Yunus Schwein, “Illuminated Arrival in the *Hikam al-‘Ata’iyyah* and Three Major Commentaries,” (MA diss., University of Georgia, 2007).

## Chapter 2 – Problematising Sufism

This chapter examines some of the prominent methods of defining Sufism and highlights the problems inherent within these definitions. It also considers some of the prominent biases within the literature on Sufism.

### *Approaches to the Term “Sufism”*

It has been said that “today Sufism is a name without a reality, but formerly it was a reality without a name.”<sup>1</sup> It could be said, with regard to contemporary approaches to Sufism, both popular and scholarly, that “Sufism” is merely a name, an umbrella term so broad that its content, or reality, remains an unresolved dispute. Without attempting to resolve this dispute it is possible to see that some of the prominent scholarly methods for categorising Sufism do not adequately contextualise the material under examination. In order to understand how Sufic materials are misrepresented it is first necessary to examine examples of how Sufism is miscontextualised.

### *“Sufism” as “Islamic Mysticism”*

There is a large body of literature in English that treats “Sufism” and “Islamic mysticism” as synonyms. It is apparent in works ranging from Nicholson’s (1914) *The Mystics of Islam* to Knysh’s (2000) *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, amongst others.<sup>2</sup> Without documenting the

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<sup>1</sup> Abu’l Hassan Fushanjan, quoted in Ali Bin Uthman Hujwiri, *The Kashf al Mahjub*, trans. Reynold J Nicholson (Delhi: Taj Company, 2002), 44.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see Oluf Schönbeck, “Sufism in the USA: Creolisation, Hybridisation Syncretisation?” in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, eds. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 177, who acknowledges that the classification of Sufism as Islamic mysticism is “a tradition still used today,” somewhat uncritically. Even putting the popular literature aside, many nuanced and cautious scholarly works suffer the same uncritical classification of Sufism. For instance Ian Netton, *Sufi Ritual: The Parallel Universe* (Surry: Curzon Press, 2000), 6 casually states that Sufism is “the mystical dimension of Islam.” A further problem arises for Netton, *Sufi Ritual*, 7, in that rather than discussing what possible form of mysticism Sufism supposedly is, it is stated that it is a “truism that ... [God is] the desired Divine Focus of mystical union,” a point raised and



history of this conflation, it is possible that this view of Sufism arose from the idea that it was extraneous to Islam and that it is a syncretic mixture of previous doctrines. Whilst Arberry's work is dated, his assertion that "it is proposed for the sake of brevity to accept ... that the Sufis owed much or little of what they did or said to Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Zoroastrian or Buddhist example"<sup>3</sup> can be seen to persist in both scholarly and popular literature with statements like the Qur'an "provides little explicit treatment of mystical themes"<sup>4</sup> and that "Islam took much longer to develop than has usually been supposed, and that in the slow process of development Christian materials were used to build the mystical side of the religion, the side which was to become Sufism."<sup>5</sup> Yet, irrespective of how the term 'Islamic mysticism' arose, it abounds in both popular and scholarly literature to such an extent that it is commonly accepted to answer "what is Sufism?" with "Islamic mysticism" without taking into account the problematic nature of the term "mysticism."

An understanding of the term "Islamic mysticism" depends on what is meant by "mysticism." A main problem here is that, despite varying conceptions of mysticism, discussions detailing which kind of mysticism Sufism supposedly represents are lacking. There is a plethora of different kinds of mysticism, such that "in 1899 Dean W. R. Inge listed twenty-five definitions,"<sup>6</sup> and a detailed discussion of each would take us too far afield.<sup>7</sup> If "mysticism" is understood in

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rejected in chapter 7 below. Cyrus A. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics* (Columbia: The University of Carolina Press, 2011), *passim*, uses the words "Sufi" and "mystic" interchangeably without hesitation or discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur J. Arberry, *Sufism* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. A. McGregor, *Sancity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 9. This point is a matter of dispute for it has been seen that "chronologically, Sufism precedes Christian love mysticism," Louis Dupré, "Mysticism [First Edition]," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6348.

Nevertheless, the view that Sufism is a syncretic mix of preceding mysticisms is one that persists. For instance, in the existing literature it is common that an author will assert such conflicting view as Sufism is an "expression of mysticism indigenous to Islam" while at the same time the "Islamic mystical movement ... [is] the direct heir of Hellenistic asceticism," Winston E. Waugh, *Sufism: The Mystical Side of Islam* (United States of America: Xulon Press, 2005), 8 – 10. All of that overlooks the well documented observance that "with the exception of certain antinomian ('rule-breaking') groups, Sufis have generally followed the lifeways of Islamic custom," Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Dupré, "Mysticism," 6341.

<sup>7</sup> An example of how this may be seen to be problematic is the comment that Sufism is "the major mystical tradition in Islam," Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

its etymological sense relating to the mysteries inherent within each religion, then this issue would not arise, for there are numerous “Sufi” works that discuss unveiling and perceiving the unseen.<sup>8</sup> The conflation of “mysticism” and “Sufism” may be the result of early studies which focused on unique cases, such as al-Hallaj and Bayazid Bistami,<sup>9</sup> where ambiguous statements have caused controversy. Within the history of Islam such statements have led to accusations of apostasy due to the view that such individuals are claiming identity with God (*ittihad*) and has been a source of controversy levelled against the Sufis at various times throughout history,<sup>10</sup> a point rejected by most given the title Sufi.<sup>11</sup> This understanding of “mysticism” as a rejection of orthodoxy may be evident in other traditions though, despite claims of identity with God by some who have been labelled “Sufis,” “a careful study of even the strongest claims for mystical identity with God across the three [Jewish, Christian, and Islamic] traditions demonstrates that few mystics have consciously adopted an antinomian stance or broken with the common religious practices and institutional claims of their tradition.”<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of how it arose, this view of “mysticism” often involves a general ambivalence towards the revealed law such that it is said that “the mystic does not have respect for the laws of religion since he

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2007), 1. While it does acknowledge disparate mystical approaches within Islam, there is no deliniation on a) what is meant by “mystical tradition” or “mysticism” or b) how Sufism differs from other, so called, “mystical traditions” within Islam.

<sup>8</sup> It could even be suggested that the Greek qualifier *mustikos*, from which “mysticism” is derived, which is itself derived from the verb *muein*, meaning “to close the mouth or eyes” has some correlation with Sufi ideals in that its goals include seeing the world as the words of God, thus closing the human mouth, and perceiving the Divine unity (*tawhid*), thus closing the eyes to multiplicity, though this would require further elaboration than can be done here. That there is a clasificatory problem with the term “Islamic mysticism” has been acknowledged by, amongst others, Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), 2, states that “this expression does have a certain relevance if one understands it as the knowledge of the ‘mysteries’,” though is cautious not to take it any further because “in the Christian world, the term ‘mysticism’ has been extended to apply to cases which are imbued with individual subjectivism,” which he feels does not apply here.

<sup>9</sup> Massignon has been accused, in his study of al-Hallaj, of utilising one example to make generalisations which are not representative of Sufis in general.

<sup>10</sup> Reynold A. Nicholason and Georges C. Anawati, “Ittihad,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), vol. IV, 283.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Universal Tree and the Four Birds*, trans. Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2006), 53, rejects this accusation because “*ittihad* is that two essences become one,” which is, as Souad al-Hakim, *Ibid.*, 35. recognizes, “impossible according to Ibn ‘Arabi” for this would be counter to the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard McGinn, “Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6336.

has another and more direct route to the truth, that of experience of God.”<sup>13</sup> One method for supposedly clarifying any possible confusion between Sufism and other forms of mysticism is to add that “there were mystics in the Islamic world who could be characterized in this way, but the system of mysticism is just as systematic as any other form of intellectual enquiry.”<sup>14</sup> While at first glance there appears to be a distinction between Sufism as Islamic mysticism and other forms of mysticism, there is no contrast between mysticism as a rejection of revealed law and the rigorous adherence to the revealed law (*shari’a*) stressed by numerous Sufis. The necessity of Sufis adhering to the revealed law (*shari’a*) is evident in statements including, though not limited to, al-Junayd’s saying that, regarding the Sufi path, “our knowledge must be controlled by conformity with the Qur’an and the Sunna”<sup>15</sup> and Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili’s saying that “if your mystical unveiling (*kashf*) diverges from the Qur’an and Sunna, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling; tell yourself that the Qur’an and Sunna is guaranteed by God Most High, which is not the case with the unveiling inspiration and mystical perceptions.”<sup>16</sup> Rather, positing Sufism as a sort of “systematic” form of mysticism misses a crucial aspect of the relationship between the Sufi and the law (*shari’a*).

With the large number of possible types of mysticism, the term itself can be considered problematic. The problem is that “no definition could be both meaningful and sufficiently comprehensive to include all experiences that, at some point or other, have been described as ‘mystical’.”<sup>17</sup> As has been suggested “the process of mysticism’s reinvention in departicularized form needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity.”<sup>18</sup> This issue is compounded with a separate, though equally problematic, issue of the umbrella term

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<sup>13</sup> Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 192.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad A. H. Ansari, “The Doctrine of One Actor: Junayd’s View of Tawhid,” *The Muslim World* 73 (1983): 36.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Sha’rani quoted by Pierre Lory, “Al-Shadhili,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), vol. IX, 171.

<sup>17</sup> Dupré, “Mysticism,” 6341. Thus, descriptions of Sufism such as it being “a devotional and mystical current within the Islamic tradition” become significantly less meaningful than they first appear, Martin van Bruinessen and Julia D. Howell, *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Leigh E. Schmidt, “The Making of Modern Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 71 (2003): 275.

“Sufism.”<sup>19</sup> It has been recognised that “Sufism is not a simple and monolithic entity but a collection of rich and diverse traditions with numerous currents that sometimes compete with each other.”<sup>20</sup> Whilst it is problematic, it would be premature to discard the term “Sufism” given that its conflation with “mysticism” can be seen to mis-contextualise the material it supposedly covers. This is especially so, given the difficulty in determining which, if any, form of mysticism Sufism conforms to. In this regard it is useful to ask “to what extent ... does the use of a term created in the modern Christian West distort the meaning of key figures, movements, and texts from the traditions of Judaism and Islam,”<sup>21</sup> especially when it is used indiscriminately. As “the term has no real counterpart in other traditions, it is not surprising that the suitability of mysticism as a neutral, global term has been questioned by some scholars,”<sup>22</sup> yet a gap remains in the literature which discusses “Sufism” as “Islamic mysticism.” Rather than attempting to bridge this gap, this work attempts to highlight the need for a closer reading of primary materials in order to suggest the need for revisiting these broad, and sometimes limiting, categorisations.

A consequence of the problematic nature of the terms involved is that there is the potential to de-Islamize Sufism. By equating “Sufism” with “Islamic mysticism” it can force studies of Sufism to conform to the paradigms used to analyse other forms of mysticism. Others have suggested that there has been a “disproportionate emphasis of earlier Western translations and secondary studies” that, while “quite understandable in terms of pioneering European scholars’ natural interests,” has left a “legacy of that problematic initial definition of ‘Islamic mysticism’.”<sup>23</sup> This initial definition has reinforced “a potent combination of theological presuppositions and questionable historical paradigms that together have largely blocked a

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<sup>19</sup> This problem is not unique to the field of Sufi studies. Other religious studies are beginning to realise that, far from denying that forms of mysticism exist, the generic term “mysticism” has a normative affect on the materials that are subsumed within its borders, undermining the richness and diversity of those materials. For an overview and example of how this arises within studies on Jewish mysticism see Schafer, *Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, 1 – 30.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Afzaal, “Sufism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 1604.

<sup>21</sup> McGinn, “Mystical Union,” 6334.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Moore, “Mysticism [Further Considerations],” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2004), vol. 9, 6355.

<sup>23</sup> James W. Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality,” in *Mystics of the Book*, ed. Robert A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993), 308.

more adequate scholarly perception of Islamic ‘mysticism’.”<sup>24</sup> This lack of adequate scholarly understanding is partly from “an unwarranted tendency on the part of many Western scholars to underemphasise in Islamic intellectual thought those Arabic and Persian ideas ... as well as those original and particularly Sufic themes which are not essentially related to Greek philosophy or to [other] monotheistic traditions,” the result of this being an approach that “tends to reduce Sufic themes to an outgrowth of Greek philosophy or a mere dimension of Islamic religion.”<sup>25</sup> As a result of this “non-Muslim observers from many backgrounds have continued to read their own models of ‘religion’ and religious authority – including equally inappropriate notions of ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘orthopraxy’ – into the most diverse Islamic settings.”<sup>26</sup> In support of this it has been noted that “the notion of [Sufism as] mysticism relied on a culturally Protestant, temporally modernist and intellectually cosmopolitan construction of religion in which the authority of the solitary individual’s direct, unmediated experience was seen to be the fountainhead of authentic religiosity across all cultures and all people.”<sup>27</sup> There is some truth in this claim. Indeed, at times Sufism has been “assigned the part of the syncretistic bastard in the family of world religions.”<sup>28</sup> In contrast to this, there is the traditional view that “the realisation of the spiritual virtues and their relation to the metaphysical ground and destiny of human souls – is itself at the very centre of the explicit, ‘exoteric’ Qur’anic text.”<sup>29</sup> Equating Sufism with forms of mysticism de-contextualises its heritage. The assertion that Sufism is as a syncretic outgrowth of multiple traditions, and other similar views which attempt to equate Sufism with mysticism, distorts the material under examination because it fails to adequately contextualise Sufi works.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>25</sup> Parviz Morewedge, “Sufism, Neoplatonism, and Zaehner’s Theory of Mysticism,” in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Caravan Books, 1981), 223.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’,” 310. An example of this is Helena Hallenberg, *Ibrahim al-Dasuqi (1255 – 1296): A Saint Invented* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2005). Here an overtly Christian notion of sainthood is utilised to evaluate the status of a Muslim considered by many to be a saint, the result of which is a study that misrepresents both Ibrahim al-Dasuqi and Islamic notions of sainthood. A similar observation could be seen in Waugh’s view of Sufism as a kind of Christianised Islam. Despite overlooking certain important scholars and traditional texts within his work, it is apparent that Waugh’s views are heavily influenced by his vocation as senior pastor “where for over 21 years he became a journeyman dispenser of the Word of Jesus Christ, Waugh, *Sufism*, backcover. To reiterate a previous statement, this in no way denies crosscultural influences, though, without further evidence, such views cannot but be seen as the author’s personal leanings.

<sup>27</sup> Green, *Sufism*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Schönbeck, “Sufism in the USA,” 177.

<sup>29</sup> Morris, “Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’,” 309.

An alternative to describing Sufism as “Islamic mysticism” has been to understand Sufism as “Islamic esoterism.” In understanding Sufism as “Islamic esoterism” it is helpful to see that exoterism (*ilm az-zahir*) and esoterism (*ilm al-batin*) are in no way contradictory or conflicting,<sup>30</sup> nor is priority given to one or the other. Esoterism is the internal complement of exoterism for “what, in exoterism, are dogmas and observances, become, in esoterism, unconditioned truth and ways of realisation.”<sup>31</sup> The corollary of this is that “in Islam as in all other traditions, it would not be possible to have an authentic esoterism without exoterism.”<sup>32</sup> However, these terms too are problematic and their boundaries are not clear cut. One example of the problematic nature of this bifurcation is that that “the division of Islam into an esoteric Path and an exoteric Law was not as clear-cut a phenomenon in its early history as it was to be later on”<sup>33</sup> and it could be suggested that within certain circles this division is still not clear-cut. A glance at the texts or practices of those deemed to be Sufis shows the blurred nature of these distinctions for their works encompass both aspects without strictly categorising as exoteric or esoteric.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the use of “esoteric” in this context has been seen as problematic in that “the popular but uncritical tendency to render the word *al-batin* as ‘esoteric’ derives from the spiritual hermeneutics of the Western Romanticism and Occultism,” which implicitly affirms the above mentioned bifurcation by distinguishing Sufism from “fulfilling the socio-political religious laws.”<sup>35</sup> It has been acknowledged that “the spiritual aspects of Islam were neither absent before the twelfth century, when organised Sufi orders started to play a major role in

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<sup>30</sup> The importance of this subtle point cannot be overstated, especially when scholars who are aware of this use phrases that do not adequately reflect this interrelation. An example of this is the statement “the ‘knowledge of the inner’ (*ilm al-batin*), as opposed to exoteric knowledge (*ilm az-zahir*),” Eric Geoffroy, “Approaching Sufism,” in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean-Louis Michon and Roger G. Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 50, which, while making a meaningful contradistinction between the two, still includes the idea of an opposition. Though there is some clarification that this is not an actual opposition for “God presents Himself as, at the same time, the Outer (*al-zahir*) and the Inner (*al-batin*), under seemingly opposite Names which the Sufi will have to reconcile during his spiritual search,” Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> William Stoddart, “Aspects of Islamic Esoterism,” in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean-Louis Michon and Roger G. Gaetani (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 237.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffroy, “Approaching Sufism,” 53 – 54.

<sup>33</sup> Victor Danner, “The Necessity for the Rise of the Term Sufi,” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 6 (1972): 72.

<sup>34</sup> An example of where there is such a division is Ibn ‘Ajiba’s Qur’anic commentary *al-Bahr al-madid*, which utilises exoteric and esoteric methods of commentary to complement each other, see Ibn ‘Ajiba, *The Immense Ocean*, trans. Mohamed F. Aresmouk and Michael A. Fitzgerald (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Algis Uzdavinyas, “Sufism in the Light of Orientalism,” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 6 (2005), 121.

Muslim societies, nor were they ever codified within such orders,”<sup>36</sup> which supports the view that Sufism is not a source of esoterism independent of the Islamic tradition.<sup>37</sup> While it can be admitted that there is something that sets “Sufi” texts apart from other Islamic texts, to assert that it is their esoteric nature is too simplistic.

Despite the practice of conflating Sufism with what is generally understood as mysticism, a further issue needs to be highlighted. While Sufism and mysticism “are by no means interchangeable expressions,”<sup>38</sup> it must be recognized that this conflation has gained such currency within both popular and scholarly materials that it has almost become standard to refer to Sufism as Islamic mysticism.

### ***“Sufism” as “Islamic Sufism”***

While not as entrenched as “Islamic mysticism,” the labelling of Sufism as “Islamic Sufism,” and to a lesser extent “Qur’anic Sufism,”<sup>39</sup> are also problematic. It is seen to be problematic because “Islamic Sufism” implies the idea that there are kinds of Sufism, some of which are Islamic and other which are not.<sup>40</sup> The use of the phrase “Islamic Sufism” differs from the issues surrounding “Islamic mysticism” in that its problematic nature is often acknowledged. Rozeahna writes that “for some ‘Islamic Sufism’ may sound redundant,” although utilised this expression

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<sup>36</sup> Afzaal, “Sufism,” 1604.

<sup>37</sup> Despite a statement such as “while it is true that Sufism encompasses many mystical elements, the broad social reach that it acquired over centuries of expansion rendered it much more than the path of an esoteric elite,” Green, *Sufism*, 1, has a greater degree of nuance than earlier works, the degree to which it relies on ideas of Sufism as mysticism and an esoterism renders it somewhat problematic.

<sup>38</sup> Josef Van Ess, “Sufism and its Opponents,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Federick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 44.

<sup>39</sup> It should be pointed out that the work of Mir Valiuddin, *The Quranic Sufism* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2002) is not an example of the tautology discussed within this section. Despite the title, Valiuddin’s, *Ibid.*, 6, view is that “Sufism is a purely Islamic discipline” and this work examines Sufism in light of the Qur’an as a rebuttle of those who would suggest that Sufism is extraneous to an Islamic paradigm.

<sup>40</sup> These “categories of Sufism in the West” are seen to include Islamic Sufi orders in the West, Quasi-Islamic Sufi orders or organisations, Non-Islamic Sufi orders or organisations, and organisations or schools related to Sufism or Sufi orders, Aziz E. K. Idrissi, *Islamic Sufism in the West*, trans. Aisha Bewley (Norwich: Diwan Press, 2013), 20.

to convey “Sufism as the essence of Islamic orthodoxy, an authentic discourse and practice firmly grounded in the dictates of normative law (*sharia*) and prophetic precedent (*sunna*).”<sup>41</sup> Even in popular literature this problem has been acknowledged. Examples include statements including, though not limited to, as one author states “there is no form of Sufism other than Islamic, I was compelled to use the adjective Islamic before Sufism, so that the uninitiated may not confuse it with other such non-Islamic movements which due to utter ignorance are styled Sufism.”<sup>42</sup>

A further issue with the term “Islamic Sufism” is that it often hides a particular cultural bias. Hammer writes that “books such as *Sufism and Psychology* and *Sufism as Therapy* are only imaginable in a culture that is impregnated with the vocabulary of popular psychology.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, while Hammer is critical of ideas such as “universal Sufism” and “Global Sufism,” the distinction between “Islamic Sufism” and “Western neo-Sufism” plays on a cultural bias that views Sufism as a universalist, or at least non-Islamic, tradition. Given that Hammer is commenting on the radical change of approaches to Sufism as it transitions from one cultural context to another, of which there are multiple examples,<sup>44</sup> this could have been flagged. Rather than comparing “Islamic Sufism” with “Western neo-Sufism,”<sup>45</sup> it could have been a comparison between Sufism, of which a quality is that it predominantly arises within an Islamic cultural context, and neo-Sufism, which could be said to occur predominantly within a non-Islamic cultural context. Had this been done, both the cultural bias and tautology within the term “Islamic Sufism” could have been avoided.

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Rozeahnal, *Islamic Sufism Unbound* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2007), 12. An example of where the tautological nature of the term “Islamic Sufism” is not explicitly acknowledged can be seen in the statement that “when the Master says ‘Islam’ and I say ‘Sufism’, we both mean the same thing, i.e., Islamic Sufism,” Henry Bayman, *The Station of No Station* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2001), xvi. While there may be some implicit recognition of the tautology, the decision not to use “Islamic Sufism” is a result of it being “quite cumbersome to say ‘Islamic Sufism’ repeatedly,” despite continuing to do so, *Ibid.*, xvi. This further makes the view that “the term ‘Sufism’ ... has remained pristine and unloaded” clearly unfounded, *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>42</sup> Sirdar Ikbal Ali Shah, *Islamic Sufism* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1971), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Olav Hammer, “Sufism for Westerners,” in *Sufism in Europe and North America*, ed. Olav Westerlund (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 142.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 129 – 138.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



In order to discard the idea of “Islamic Sufism” as a tautology it is necessary to examine the possibility of a non-Islamic Sufism. For this it is necessary to look at the source of the Sufis’ adherence to the revealed law (*shari’a*), and the Prophetic example from which it is derived, in order to determine if there is an equivalency in other traditions. The Qur’an states that “verily, in the Apostle of Allah you have a good example” (33:21) and again “say [O Prophet]: ‘If you love Allah, follow me, [and] Allah will love you” (3:31). In both instances the focus is on following the example of the Prophet, which, aside from the Qur’an, is a main source for the revealed law (*shari’a*). From their adherence to the revealed law (*shari’a*), it is possible to see why “devotion to the Prophet is signalled as one of the key characteristics of the great Sufi masters.”<sup>46</sup> That the imparting of a revealed law is a function of a messenger is apparent in the Qur’anic statement “We have sent unto you an apostle from among yourselves ... to impart unto you revelation and wisdom” (2: 151). “Revelation,” in this verse, is a translation of *al-kitab*, literally the book, referring to the Qur’an. “Wisdom” (*al-hikma*) in this verse, can be taken to refer to both the Prophetic example (*Sunnah*) and to the revealed law (*shari’a*). Thus, within Sufism adherence to the revealed law (*shari’a*) involves adhering to and following the good example of the Prophet Muhammad.

Within the Qur’an there is evidence that can be read to suggest the possibility of a non-Islamic Sufism. It is apparent in the statement that “indeed, you have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him” (60: 4). If, as mentioned, adherence to a revealed law (*shari’a*) is akin to following the example of a messenger, then “those who followed him” can have two interpretations, one regarding the genealogy of Abraham, the other regarding the companions of Abraham. Firstly, this could refer to the Prophets and Messengers from Abraham’s sons Ishmael and Isaac, who are the forefathers of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions respectively. If this is the case then this Qur’anic passage merely indicates models of salvation with a common genealogical root in Abraham. Secondly, it could, more specifically, refer to the direct followers of Abraham who embodied his example. While these two readings are not mutually exclusive, in both cases the existence of prophetic models preceding Islam is acknowledged. This would in no way come as a surprise to Muslims for whom it is an article of faith to acknowledge all prophets and messengers from Adam to Muhammad. However, it is important to point out that this passage is phrased in the past tense, which in Arabic refers to completed actions. Thus linguistically, there is an indication that following Abraham’s example is completed and, as a result, no longer viable.

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<sup>46</sup> Carl W. Ernst, *Teaching of Sufism* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 20 – 21.

It may be suggested that the Qur'an merely precludes an active non-Islamic Sufism whilst maintaining the possibility of pre-Islamic forms of Sufism. There are two responses to this. Firstly, the term "Islamic Sufism" is a relatively new phenomenon as is the claim by certain groups to be representative of non-Islamic Sufism and thus this idea of a pre-Islamic Sufism is not at stake in this case. Secondly, Abraham states that those who follow him are "those who have surrendered themselves to God" (22: 78), literally "the Muslims," and not amongst "those who are Sufis." This seems to preclude the idea that "those who follow him" (60: 4) are a form of non-Islamic Sufism. However, it could be suggested that adherence to the example set by a Prophet, being a key feature of Sufism, is to be found amongst pre-Islamic groups. The Qur'an seems to affirm the view that there were such groups, such as "those who follow him" (60: 4). However, just as there is a distinction between Prophets, it is useful to distinguish between the groups that follow them. As a result, it can be seen to be useful to reserve "Sufism" for referring to those who follow the example of the Prophet Mohammed. This has two consequences. Firstly, it preserves the inherently Islamic nature of Sufism. Secondly, by localising "Sufism," rather than using it as an umbrella term for a trans-historic methodological approach to prophethood, the phrase "Islamic Sufism" becomes tautological.

The phrase "Islamic Sufism" arose to assert the integral relationship between Islam and Sufism. The necessity for this can be seen to arise from assertions such as "the Sufis owed much or little of what they did or said to Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Zoroastrian or Buddhist example"<sup>47</sup> or that it was a sort of "Jewish Christianity," by which is meant "the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah along with the observance of Jewish law,"<sup>48</sup> such that "one expects Christianity to anticipate Sufism."<sup>49</sup> While these views of Sufism are too crude to be useful, they do indicate a prevailing view of Sufism as a syncretic belief system. Furthermore, this view prevails despite the fact that some of the greatest commentaries on the Qur'an and Islamic practices come from those recognised as great Sufi authors, such as Ibn 'Arabi, Ahmad al-Ghazali, and Abd al-Qadir Jilani. Yet, despite this, the prefix "Islamic" in the phrase "Islamic Sufism" has had less of an effect of clarifying Sufism's integral relationship with Islam. Contrary to its initial intentions, the phrase "Islamic Sufism" has had the effect of implying the possibility of a non-Islamic Sufism.

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<sup>47</sup> Arberry, *Sufism*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

One attempt to assert the possibility of a non-Islamic Sufism has, unwittingly, lent more weight to the view that “Islamic Sufism” is a tautology. Taji-Farouki distinguishes between “Islamic Sufism,” where “the spiritual path is conceived in terms of an Islamic frame of reference,” and “Universal Sufism,” where “Sufi resources [are] divorced from their Islamic framework and used as techniques in human transformation.”<sup>50</sup> While “Universal Sufism,” as it is here conceived with “no requirement to embrace Islam,”<sup>51</sup> seems to overlook the “techniques in human transformation” inbuilt within the Islamic framework, it also overlooks the relationship between Sufism and Islam inherent within its own definition. “Universal Sufism” is made universal through separating “Sufi resources” from “their Islamic framework,” thus positing an intrinsic relationship between Islam and Sufism. This, as a result, means that, in this instance, the phrase “Islamic Sufism” is a tautology.

The above examples of the use of “Islamic Sufism” have been predominantly directed towards a non-Islamic audience. For this reason it is beneficial to examine the work of Abu I-Wafa al-Taftazani (1930 – 1994) which uses “Islamic Sufism” in work directed specifically towards an Islamic audience in order to gain a better understanding of how this phrase has gained currency. Within al-Taftazani’s work there is a “presentation of Sufism as ‘Islamic mysticism’, where the change from the generic noun *tasawwuf* to the attributive compound *al-tasawwuf al-islami* is meant to indicate that Sufism was generically different (to other forms of mysticism) and that it originated from the orthodox (Sunni) norms of the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet.”<sup>52</sup> In its intention, al-Taftazani’s use of *al-tasawwuf al-islami* can be seen to be no different from other uses of “Islamic Sufism”; however, rather than confronting non-Muslim prejudices about the sources of Sufism, it is attempting to confront Muslim prejudices about the practices of Sufism. It is important to note that al-Taftazani is writing in Egypt where “state control of the Sufi orders was reorganised and bureaucratised in the form of an administrative body ... which published regulations, organised events, and was indirectly accountable for the

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<sup>50</sup> Suha Taji-Farouki, *Beshara and Ibn ‘Arabi: A Movement of Sufi Spirituality in the Modern World* (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2009), 404.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>52</sup> Andreas Christmann, “Reconciling Sufism with Theology: Abu I-Wafa al-Taftazani and the Construct of ‘al-Tasawwuf al-Islami’ in Modern Egypt,” in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Ayman Shihadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 177.

orders' activities."<sup>53</sup> This administrative body, "eventually called the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders," was "specifically charged with regulating Sufism in Egypt" in accordance with what was deemed "proper Islamic principles."<sup>54</sup> Irrespective of al-Taftazani's relation to the Supreme Council, the influence of this administrative body cannot be overlooked in the decision to use "*al-tasawwuf al-islami*" in discussing Sufism. The Supreme Council apparently defended "the existence of Sufi orders ... by emphasizing the mainstream features of Sufi devotions"<sup>55</sup> and, in this regard, al-Taftazani, in using "*Islamic mysticism*," can be seen to echo this form of defence by curtailing his mode of expression. Thus, while al-Taftazani's use of "*al-tasawwuf al-islami*" is similar in effect to other uses of "Islamic Sufism," his case is different due to the proselytising influence of the Supreme Council curbing his mode of expression.

### ***The Term "Sufism"***

While the terms "Islamic mysticism" and "Islamic Sufism" problematise two conceptualisations of Sufism, the term is problematic in itself. There are three dominant approaches in attempting to understand the term "Sufism," each of which can be seen to be inadequate. These are the etymological approach, the historical approach, and an approach that treats "Sufism" as a kind of Islamic learning, each of which can be seen to be inadequate for contextualising Sufism.

Firstly, there is an etymological approach to the term "Sufism." A main problem with this approach to Sufism is that there is a presupposition regarding its content without any clear or adequate definition. Many scholars examine the various possible etymologies for the word "Sufi" in an attempt to understand the referent with varying alternatives advanced, such that "any number of definitions and descriptions can be culled from their [scholarly] studies."<sup>56</sup> Of the alternatives offered, that which is given preference often reveals more about the bias of

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Frishkopf, "Changing Modalities in the Globalisation of Islamic Saint Veneration and Mysticism: Sidi Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, Shaykh Muhammad 'Uthman al-Burhani, and their Sufi Orders," *Religious Studies and Theology* 20 (2001): 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>56</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginners Guide* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2008), 3.

that author<sup>57</sup> rather than adequately defining “Sufism” such that it has even been advanced that it has no true etymology.<sup>58</sup> As a result, despite it being a common starting point for understanding “Sufism,” an etymological approach does not yield significant insight into the content of “Sufism.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, it is often overlooked that debate over the origins of the term “Sufi” does not cover new ground as “there was controversy over the origins of the term *sufi* among the authors of the early texts, and modern scholars have reproduced this controversy at different levels in their own writing.”<sup>60</sup> As a result the material is reiterated without giving further insight.

One aspect of the problem of an etymological approach to defining Sufism is that there is some confusion regarding that to which “Sufi” refers. With some writers there is a conflation of the terms “Sufi” and “dervish.” This has led to some writers attempting to create a distinction between these two terms that does not correspond to traditional usage. For instance it has been suggested that “the term ‘dervish’ indicates more the dimension of practice, while ‘Sufi’ designates more that of theory: the dervish is a Sufi in action, and the Sufi is a dervish in the abstract.”<sup>61</sup> One reason that the term “Sufi” may be considered abstract is that “within the Sufic tradition, the term *Sufi* is applied only to the initiate who has reached the end of the path.”<sup>62</sup> The term “Sufi” can be considered to have an abstract quality in that it refers to the goal to be achieved and, as such, those who could be described by it would not claim to be a Sufi themselves. As a result, the use of the word “Sufi” as a generic term for anyone connected to a Sufi order indicates a lack of understanding of a) the term itself and b) its relation to the soteriological framework or Sufism.

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<sup>57</sup> An example of this is Baldick’s, *Mystical Islam*, 15, preferred etymology is that “the very word *Sufi* has usually been seen as reflecting a Christian influence, being derived from the Arabic word for wool (*suf*),” in confirmation of his view that Sufism is a form of “Jewish Christianity.”

<sup>58</sup> Hujwiri, *Kashf al Mahjub*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> As Carl Ernst noted “the word was given prominence not by the Islamic texts, but rather by British Orientalists, who wanted a term that would refer to various sides of Islamic civilization that they found attractive and congenial and that would avoid the negative stereotypes associated with the religion of Islam - stereotypes that they themselves had often propagated,” in Chittick, *Sufism*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmet Karamustafa, “What is Sufism?,” in *Voices of Islam*, ed. Vincent J. Cornell (Westport: Praeger Publications, 2007), 249.

<sup>61</sup> Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Danner, “Rise of the Term,” 71.

Secondly, there is a historical approach to “Sufism.” This method attempts to define “Sufism” through its historical development. Such a history shows that around the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AH/9<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE there were certain individuals whose hermeneutic approach to Islam seemed to include certain practices others did not. In the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE there was a development which saw a large body of texts being produced in all areas of Islamic learning and again those texts labelled as “Sufic” seemed to, without excluding other areas, include certain ideas that other texts did not. If the label “Islamic mysticism” is excluded, for the reasons mentioned above, then “Sufism” becomes little more than an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of practices, people, and texts which, due to their diversity, would seem to have little in common. De Jong and Radtke’s (1999) edited collection of papers *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* proceeds with the assumption that each of the controversies and polemics are directed against the same thing, namely “Sufism,” without contesting the idea of “Sufism” itself despite a disparate range of issues being addressed. This is problematic because “historically, this aspect of Islam has given rise to diverse traditions of spiritual techniques, individual and collective rituals, metaphysical and Theosophical expositions, hagiographic writings, and mystical love poetry, as well as institutional forms of discipline, education, and mentoring – all of which have been called Sufism,”<sup>63</sup> albeit without distinguishing the position of the labeler with regard to Sufism.<sup>64</sup> Also, it must be acknowledged that there is some confusion in the view that Sufism has “given rise to diverse traditions” given that “all ... have been called Sufism” retroactively. Furthermore, “in current academic language it [Sufism] serves as a generic, catch-all sociological term,” the result of which “is an entrenched view of contemporary Sufism as a monolithic, superstitious, syncretic cult mired in profiteering and political wrangling.”<sup>65</sup> While it could be disputed that this reductive view of Sufism is held by “most Western scholars of Islam,” it is interesting to note that it is a view that “parallels the attacks leveled against Sufism by its Islamist detractors.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Afaal, “Sufism,” 1604.

<sup>64</sup> This can be seen in traditional texts where the term has been used both pejoratively and complementarily.

<sup>65</sup> Rozeahnal, *Islamic Sufism*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Histories of Sufism are problematic in as far as they proceed with the assumption that “Sufism” is predefined such that when it is applied to the history of Islam all the “Sufis” become readily apparent. Without denying that there is “Sufism” in the works of those included, the popular approach of providing a list of “Sufis” can range from being an arbitrary selection of Muslims to having a normative affect on approaching the works of such individuals.<sup>67</sup> Opposed to this, elements of “Sufism” can be found in those thinkers labelled as “anti-Sufi.”<sup>68</sup> While a historical approach does yield some reference points with regard to that which is considered “Sufic,” showing where the boundary lies with regard to that which is accepted as “Sufism,” it must be acknowledged that it does not provide a definition.

Thirdly, there is an approach that treats Sufism as a category of Islamic learning. The problem with this approach is not that it draws an integral link between Sufism and Islam, for despite assertions that it is “necessary to attack a position often taken for granted, namely that it [Sufism] grew out of the Koran,”<sup>69</sup> it has rarely been “taken for granted” with some continuing to hold that the Qur’an “provides little explicit treatment of mystical themes.”<sup>70</sup> Rather, a problem with treating Sufism as a category of Islamic learning is that Sufism does not adhere to a strict categorisation in the way categories such as Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*), Hadith studies, Islamic law (*fiqh*), Arabic Grammar, or any other category of Islamic learning does. These categories of Islamic learning have defined boundaries with regard to content, for example those examining the authenticity of Hadith study the legitimacy of the chains of transmission (*isnad*), while those examining Islamic law (*fiqh*) examine how laws can be extrapolated from the Qur’an and Hadith. There is some degree of interaction between these disciplines, an example of which is those examining Islamic law (*fiqh*) are dependent on those examining the authenticity of Hadith to determine which Hadith can be used for extrapolating laws. However, even a cursory glance at some of the better known Sufi works shows many examples of cross-disciplinary studies encompassing the breadth of Islamic learning whilst containing an element, which, for lack of a better word, could be called “Sufic” that is rarely found in works that belong

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<sup>67</sup> Examples of these kind of lists include Claud Field, *Mystics and Saints of Islam* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1910) and Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 3 – 5, and “What is Sufism,” 250.

<sup>68</sup> For instance, regarding Ibn Taymiyya’s “Sufi” elements see George Makdisi, “Ibn Taymiyya: A Sufi of the Qadiriya Order,” *American Journal of Arabic Studies* 1 (1973) and Th Emil Homerin, “Ibn Taimiyya’s al-Sūfiyyah wa-al-Fuqarā,” *Arabica* 32 (1985).

<sup>69</sup> Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> McGregor, *Sancity and Mysticism*, 2.

strictly to one of the other categories of Islamic learning. Whilst further study is required to establish this point, it is evident that it is problematic to view Sufism, due to its cross-disciplinary nature, as strictly another discipline of Islamic learning.

## ***Systematic Sufism***

Again, is it often suggested that Sufism is not systematic. This claim persists because Sufi texts are generally not holistic, in the sense of encapsulating the system, from which it is inferred that Sufism is incomplete and thus limited. While it is possible to agree with this conclusion, it would be for different reasons. The assertion that Sufism has no system arises from the basis that no system can be derived from the examined texts. However, this overlooks a) the purposes of the texts and b) the paradigm that underpins them. The purpose is sometimes explicit, being composed in response to a specific request. Though, even when the purpose is unclear, it is evident that the texts are underpinned by a doctrine not covered within the text itself. Even works such as al-Ghazali's *Ihya ulum al-din* or Ibn 'Arabi's *Futuh al-makkiyya*, even though the breadth of both is almost incomparable, each is incomplete without an Islamic paradigm. As a result, Sufi texts need not be self-contained, though this in no way implies that they are unsystematic or incomplete. As will be shown in the study that follows, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works affirm this view in that they freely quote the Qur'an and Hadith and include elliptical statements that would be incomprehensible without knowledge of Islam.

It can be seen that, in part, the view that Sufism is incomplete and unsystematic arise from the view that Sufism is ancillary to Islam. While the view that Sufism is ancillary to Islam emerged amongst Orientalists,<sup>71</sup> it persists with statements like the Qur'an "provides little explicit treatment of mystical themes."<sup>72</sup> It persists despite Nicholson, who in his early work advanced the view that "Sufism cannot be traced back to a single definite cause,"<sup>73</sup> later retracted his

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<sup>71</sup> Amongst whom comments like "asceticism has no place in the teaching of the Qur'an and is alien to the character of early Islam," De Lacy O'Leary, *Arab Thought and its Place in History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1992), 181-82, while unfounded, are common. While O'Leary would not be considered an Orientalist, comments like these show that, even if he was not directly influenced by them, he shared their sentiments.

<sup>72</sup> McGregor, *Sancity and Mysticism*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Arkana, 1989), 8. Furthermore, Arberry, *Sufism*, 11, Nicholson's student and successor, in his summary of Sufism, wrote that "it is proposed for the sake of brevity to



original position, stating that it is a “fact that Sufism, like every other religious movement in Islam, has its roots in the Koran and the Sunna.”<sup>74</sup> The view that Sufism is ancillary to Islam has been refuted by Rabbani,<sup>75</sup> among others,<sup>76</sup> by advancing the argument that if Sufism is ancillary to Islam then so is Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and Islamic law (*fiqh*) as none of these were evident during the advent of Islam. Danner supports this, writing that “the Sufis are well aware that nothing called *Sufi* existed in the time of the Prophet”<sup>77</sup> and that “the four major schools of Sunnite jurisprudence ... all go back to their founders who lived in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries,”<sup>78</sup> during which the term ‘Sufi’ gained currency. The problematic nature of the existence of Sufism is not unique to modern scholarship, for example, as a young man Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah did not hold this view, and only later came to see Sufism as being integral to Islam. It was Abu Al-Abbas’ knowledge of Islam, especially the interconnections between its exoteric and esoteric aspects, which convinced Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah of the integral connection. While such interconnections may remain a matter of dispute, they have been repeatedly affirmed, especially in works labelled “Sufic.”

### ***One Further Difficulty***

Even acknowledging the long history of the problem of defining “Sufism,” and the issues this gives rise to, only covers part of the issues with the use of this category. The lack of a consensus on the etymology of the term is further problematised due to disagreements on claims on, and ascriptions of, being a Sufi. This point touches on the distinction between authentic Sufism and pseudo-Sufism, an issue that cannot be fully discussed here. The problem as it stands is that, on

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accept ... that the Sufis owed much or little of what they did or said to Christian, Jewish, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Zoroastrian or Buddhist example.” Not only did Arberry believe that Sufism was a syncretic mixture of previous doctrines, he, *Ibid.*, 136, further felt that “Sufism has run its course,” signalling deathblows to both Sufism’s originality and continuance.

<sup>74</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Idea of Personality in Sufism* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1964), 4.

<sup>75</sup> Wahid B. Rabbani, *Islamic Sufism* (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 1992), 123.

<sup>76</sup> Geoffroy, “Approaching Sufism,” 49 – 50, advances the same argument, adding that “the term *salafi*, which designates modern Muslims who claim to be like the first believers (*salaf*) and who reject all doctrinal, and notably mystical, contributions, ... does not have any greater claim to scriptural support.”

<sup>77</sup> Danner, “Rise of the Term,” 72.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

one hand, Sufism has been used as a degenerate term to undermine, rightly or wrongly, various groups within the history of Islam,<sup>79</sup> while, on the other hand, it can be seen to occupy an ambiguous position even within pro-Sufi texts and writers.<sup>80</sup> If we take Ibn Taymiyya's opposition to Sufism as a case in point, it is possible to see that his ascription of unorthodox practices to various Sufi groups arises as a result of misunderstanding the particular practices of these groups.<sup>81</sup> The misunderstanding of Sufi views and practices has also caused fears of potential political turmoil due to the numbers various Sufi groups have gained in various regions across the Islamic world throughout its history, resulting in the ostracising, and suppression, of such groups in many of those regions.<sup>82</sup> This is further problematised in modern, non-Muslim countries where "the terms 'Sufi' and 'Sufism' are being used to characterise a vast and composite field covering more traditional Sufi orders with an unambiguous and explicit Islamic frame of reference ... as well as less traditional Sufi groups and movements, which apart from a limited nomenclature and a few practices have nothing in common with Islamic faith."<sup>83</sup> While these points require further analysis, they are sufficient to illustrate some of the reasons for the ambiguous and sometimes negative view of Sufism.

Another, perhaps more interesting, reason for the difficulty of creating a clear distinction between Sufism and pseudo-Sufism can be found in apparently pro-Sufi texts and writers. The issue is that in some works there is the view of a Sufi as the culmination of soteriological development while in others the Sufi is discussed as merely a soteriological stage through which the aspirant passes to further soteriological development. While further study is required to understand these two conceptions of "Sufi," and the reasons for its variegated used, one

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<sup>79</sup> This is particularly so in the modern era and can be seen on numerous discussion boards where statements such as "this is Sufi" are synonymous with "this is untrustworthy."

<sup>80</sup> As has been noted that "some of the harshest criticism [of Sufism] has traditionally come from within the ranks of the Sufis," Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), ix.

<sup>81</sup> This form of criticism due to a lack of understanding is well documented by Alexander D. Knych, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), in the history of the anti-Ibn 'Arabi polemic.

<sup>82</sup> A recent example of this is the closing and outlawing of the *tekkes* in Turkey, despite the popularisation and promotion of the whirling dervish as a tourist attraction to the point where it has almost become a national icon.

<sup>83</sup> Schönbeck, "Sufism in the USA," 183. For a brief overview of Sufism's recontextualisation within Islamic circles in a predominantly British setting see Netton, *Sufi Ritual*, 1 – 6. For changes to Sufic and Islamic practice within one Sufi order in Germany see Søren C. Lassen, "Strategies for Concord: The Transformation of the Tariqa Burhaniya in the European Environment," in *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community*, ed. Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 189 – 207.

thing is clear. Irrespective of whether a Sufi is someone who has reached their summit of soteriological development or someone who has reached a particular point within their soteriological development, the esteem given to the “Sufis” is high, even if they are not beyond the criticism of some writers.

### ***Some Consequences for the Study of Sufism***

There has been some acknowledgement that the scholarly approach to Sufism needs to be modified with the suggestion that the study of Sufism “requires that we re-evaluate some basic analytical assumptions underlying the study of Sufism.”<sup>84</sup> While correct, this does not penetrate the issue as those “basic analytical assumptions” are often symptoms of the mis-categorisation of Sufism. There have been suggestions, especially with regard to Islamic materials, to challenge existing categorisations, apparent in the view that “somewhat uncritical, for a time, in Western work was the use of the category ‘scripture’ as a general – and rather taken-for-granted – rubric, under which the Qur’an was included.”<sup>85</sup> Yet, such challenges are yet to be applied to the category “Sufism.” Acknowledging the above-mentioned classification errors is important for developing a better understanding of Sufism. However, simply acknowledging them does not readily propose a method for positively categorising Sufism. Sufism could be, for example, a form of Islamic mysticism though it should be recognised that there are “subtle and major differences of understanding in the Islamic case – differences [too] significant for a generic concept”<sup>86</sup> and any discussion of Sufism as Islamic mysticism should document what kind of mysticism Sufism represents and how the Islamic case differs from others. However, discussions of Sufism within scholarly literature too often uncritically accept prior categorisations rather than questioning the legitimacy of the categorisation itself.

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<sup>84</sup> John O. Voll, “Contemporary Sufism and Current Social Theory,” in *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam*, eds. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia D. Howell (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 282.

<sup>85</sup> Wilfred C. Smith, “A Note on the Qur’an from a Comparativist Perspective,” in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, eds. Wael B. Hallaq and Donald P. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 183.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 183. Smith is here referring to the Qur’an being categorised as “scripture.” While he is challenging a different categorisation the sentiment is fitting for the context.

Despite the necessity for critical reflection and reassessment of its classification, “Sufism” can be utilised as a legitimate grouping. It is important to realise that “Sufism is not a static, homogenous ‘thing’ that can be studied in isolation,”<sup>87</sup> thus a correct contextualisation is necessary. By acknowledging that it is active within Islamic contexts it is possible to see that Sufism, despite its diversity of manifestation, is continuous in its function. By contextualising Sufism as such it could be tentatively suggested that its function is to act as a counterbalance to extremist and dogmatic views within Islamic communities, which would go some way to explaining the diversity amongst those who have been labelled ‘Sufi’.

It is possible to identify that Sufism combines two interrelated elements or that it performs two functions, both of which illustrate that Sufism is unmistakably underpinned by Islamic paradigms. Firstly, and proactively, Sufism can be seen to consist of a hermeneutic method that intends to highlight the predominantly soteriological elements within Islamic doctrine. In doing so, Sufism emphasises the constant and intimate relationship between the individual and Allah, often with emphasis on the personal responsibilities of the former if they are to realise, affirm, and embody the degree of intimacy towards the latter that exists irrespective of the individual’s awareness of it. As has been suggested:

*If the Qur’an and Tradition are at pains to teach what the relation of God to the world is, and what man must do to be saved, the purpose of the Sufis was to elucidate how, to elaborate a theoretical explanation of the modality of the relationship holding between Creator and creation.*<sup>88</sup>

In this regard, Sufism can be seen as personal and proactive in that the focus is on the individual and their engagement in the soteriological process. While this is of primary importance for understanding Sufism, it is an element that is well known and is often the primary focus for texts on the topic.

Sufism can also be seen to have a reactive element. This element is often overlooked in discussions on Sufism and it is important because it a) partly explains the reasons behind the prominence of particular Sufi figures within various eras and localities and b) places Sufism

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<sup>87</sup> Rozehnal, *Islamic Sufism*, 14.

<sup>88</sup> Anthony H. Jones, “Sufism as a Category in Indonesian Literature and History,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2 (1961): 13.

undeniably within an Islamic paradigm. Furthermore, examining this reactive element allows for a there to be some consistency across the history of Islam for there to be a transhistorical thing deemed “Sufism,” despite varied and shifting concerns in those figures and texts labelled “Sufic.” Given that the primary and proactive element of Sufism is a continued access to the salvific growth of the individual, the reactive element can be seen to be an attempt to maintain this within the greater community. It is generally accepted that Sufism grew out of the activities of Islamic ascetics that arose within the 3<sup>rd</sup> AH/9<sup>th</sup> CE century, a movement that has been seen as a response to the growing focus of worldly concerns within the greater Islamic community.<sup>89</sup> This function of refocusing the community on the salvific nature of the Islamic doctrine is a trend that can be seen within most of the figures that are seen as having been great and important Sufi figures. Within the history of Sufism, this refocusing can be seen to have come about through both external and internal influences on the Islamic community that have been deemed as being a distraction from the soteriological development of the individual.

A sample of “Sufic” figures can sufficiently illustrate the importance that this reactive element has had within Islamic communities. While the ecstatic utterances of Hallaj could be read as a reaction to the stifling aridity of the scholars of his era, there is perhaps stronger evidence for the reactive element of Sufism in the action of his Shaykh. Despite the outcry of many, it was not until Junayd, Hallaj’s Sufi teacher, agreed to sign what was effectively a death warrant that action was taken. Despite his reticence of agreeing to the warrant, Junayd’s actions can be read as attempting to maintain the salvific potential for those who were/could have been put off by such ecstatic utterances. Many of al-Ghazali’s writings can be seen to have arisen as a response to the utilisation of external, and to some extent un-Islamic, materials. A clear example of the is his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which effectively illustrates some of the contradictions inherent in those who have attempted to reconcile, and ultimately rely on, Neoplatonic and Aristotelian materials with Islamic ones, particularly the Qur’an. Such contradictions are problematic for they undermine the position of revelation with regard to the individual’s salvation. Even Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s position as Ibn Taymiyya’s infamous interlocutor can be seen in the same light, for, as text of their alleged debate shows, the latter was raising objections to certain practices and individuals that was liable to cause distraction or, at worst, harm to the generality of the Islamic community in the manner in which they carried out their daily

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<sup>89</sup> Examples of such individuals who possessed reactive tendencies towards what they deemed to be cultural shifts that could potentially hinder the continuance of the salvific nature of the Islamic doctrine are riddled throughout the history of Islam, for “Gibb points out that after the fall of the Caliphate, the Sufis played an increasingly important part in preserving the unity of the Islamic world, counteracting the tendency of the territories of the Caliphate to fissure into Arabic, Persian, and Turkish linguistic regions,” *Ibid.*, 14.

devotions. Despite there being no evidence that Ibn 'Ata' Allah was implicated in Ibn Taymiyya's objections, he nevertheless marched against him. Thus it is possible that his primary cause for marching against and confronting Ibn Taymiyya was to attempt to curtail the enmity that such views were liable to raise between the Muslims within their community.

Furthermore, the reactive element can also be found within contemporary expressions of Sufism. There has been, within the work of modern scholars, "about two decades of intellectual debate about whether Sufism had, in fact, changed its focus in a significant way during the eighteenth-century reform movements to emphasize Hadith studies and the Prophet's role rather than the Gnostic monism of Ibn 'Arabi."<sup>90</sup> Without commenting on this discussion explicitly, given what has been suggested here about the reactive element of Sufism, while a shift such as this might be perceived as a "significant" change in focus, it can also be seen as a necessary one for maintaining the salvific potential of Islam accessible to those who propose to realise it. Further support of this is evident in the fact that "Sufism has come to play a more important role among the more recent trends in cultural theorizing, since it is the expression of Islam that most incorporates local cultural elements and embodies *local* Islams."<sup>91</sup> This recognition of Sufism's focus on locality and the local community could be seen as Sufism's focus on attempting to maintain the salvific element within and through the community's expression of Islam. While this is merely a sample of figures from the multitude of "Sufic" figures within the history of Islam, it sufficiently shows that a) the primary concern of the reactive element of Sufism is to Islamic communities and b) this concern is for the continued access to the salvific potential within Islam.

Taken in conjunction, the proactive and reactive elements, both together and individually, illustrate reasons why Sufism cannot be considered as merely another discipline like other Islamic disciplines like Qur'an study and commentary, Hadith studies, jurisprudence, or any other. The proactive element of Sufism, in focusing on the soteriological development of the individual, draws from all other Islamic disciplines in as far as each of these disciplines can contribute to the individual's salvation. The reactive element of Sufism, in focusing on an attempt to maintain the salvific potential within the community, will, at times, utilise certain uniquely Islamic disciplines to promote the accessibility of salvation, whether it be through

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<sup>90</sup> Hermansen, "Academic Study of Sufism," 36.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 32.

Qur'anic commentary or Friday sermons, while speaking out against elements that threaten the community's access to salvation, whether it be al-Ghazali's writing against reliance on non-Islamic philosophical sources, Junayd's agreement to move against al-Hallaj, or even Ibn 'Ata' Allah's march against Ibn Taymiyya. It is for these reasons that it is proposed that it is necessary to re-evaluate the materials and thinkers who have been collected under the label of "Sufism" in order to better understand the content of their works and what, if any, contribution they make to the history of Islam generally and Sufism specifically.

## Part II

### Chapter 3 – The Case of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah

#### *Provision (rizq) as an entry point to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s Oeuvre*

To highlight Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological cosmography, as well as some of the interconnections between his works, this work will attempt to explore these interconnections through the examination of the problem of Provision (*rizq*). Provision, or specifically its pursuit, belongs to the domain of creation, though this poses a rationally perplexing problem. The problem is as follows: as contingently existent beings, that is, as creations we are not self sufficient and, as such, require provision for our continued existence. However, as our existence and that of our provision comes from the same source, namely Allah, what impetus is there to seek provision and how are we to respond when provision is either granted or denied? This problem covers a diverse range of areas and its implications are equally diverse, covering domains such as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, morality, eschatology, and soteriology. Far from providing a comprehensive analysis of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s views on these areas, each successive chapter will examine one area and its relation to the problem of *rizq*. This method should sufficiently show the continuity of goal and method throughout Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre, without making a comprehensive analysis necessary while foregrounding his reliance on an inherently Islamic paradigm. Furthermore, this analysis will highlight one of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s primary methodological tools, which is here being called his soteriological semiotics.<sup>1</sup>

*Rizq* literally means “anything granted by someone to someone else as a benefit,” hence “bounty, sustenance, nourishment.”<sup>2</sup> The Qur’an states “verily, unto Allah do we belong and, verily, unto Him we shall return” (2: 156), which is taken as an indication that all real benefit derives from Allah. This view is strengthened by verses such as “partake of the good things which We have provided for your sustenance” (2: 57), amongst others.<sup>3</sup> In the Qur’an,

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<sup>1</sup> As will become apparent as this work progresses, soteriological semiotics is, in a way, a hermeneutics of *tawhid* which takes all things within creation as being signs and signifiers from Allah as a method of communication for the individual able to perceive them, drawing them towards the affirmation of *tawhid*.

<sup>2</sup> Jane D. McAuliffe, “RIZK,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), vol. VIII, 567.

<sup>3</sup> Without being exhaustive, see also 2: 60, 2: 172, 3: 169, 5: 88, 5: 114, 6: 142, 6: 151, 7: 160, 8: 26, and 10: 31.



wherever *rizq*, or its related verbal forms, occur Allah is “virtually always the subject or implied agent.”<sup>4</sup> That all sustenance rests on Allah is put beyond dispute in the Qur’anic statement that “there is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on Allah” (11: 6). Thus, the problem of *rizq* includes questions of the pursuit of sustenance given that we and our sustenance depend equally on Allah, how sustenance should be pursued if ultimately it does not come through individual effort, and, perhaps most importantly, how this can be achieved without making partners with Allah.

One, seemingly unrelated, use of the term *rizq* occurs within military terminology. Here, *rizq* refers to regular payments made to registered soldiers.<sup>5</sup> In the Qur’an it states that Allah “grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, unto whomever He wills”<sup>6</sup> (42: 12) and that it is granted “in due measure” (42: 27). Just as the measure due to a soldier depends on the amount they have served, the measure due to the individual depends on their sincerity and consistency of worship, as the Qur’an states “seek, then, all sustenance from Allah, and worship Him and be grateful to Him” (29: 17). Similarly, just as the soldier struggles against opponents, which is known as the lesser struggle (*jihad as-sagir*) the individual struggles against their own ego, which is known as the greater struggle (*jihad al-kabir*). While the significance of this point will become evident in the chapter on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriology, it is important here to see that in moving from an egocentric worldview to a God-centred worldview that knowledge of the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*) being the method for such transition, is crucial. Thus, *rizq* is not solely provision in a gross materialistic sense, but also includes the measure of knowledge each individual has, amongst other things.

That *rizq* is not limited to materialistic sustenance has been discussed by various thinkers. Insight into the breath of this term can be gained from al-Ghazali’s commentary on the Divine name *al-razzaq*, the Provider, where he states that,

*Al-razzaq – the Provider – is the one who created the means of sustenance as well as those who are sustained, and who conveys the means to the creatures as well as creating for them the ways of enjoying them. Sustaining*

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<sup>4</sup> McAuliffe, “RIZK,” 568.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford E. Bosworth, “RIZK,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), vol. VIII, 568.

<sup>6</sup> This tenet, with minor variations, is repeated throughout the Qur’an. See 2: 212, 3: 27, 13: 26, 16: 71, 17: 30, 24: 38, 28: 82, 29: 62, 30: 37, 34: 36, 34: 39, and 39: 52, among others.

*is of two kinds: outward, consisting of nourishment and food, which is for the sake of what is outward, namely the body. Inwardly, it consists in things known and things revealed, and that is directed to our hearts and in most parts. This latter is the higher of the two modes of sustenance, for its fruit is eternal life; while the fruit of external sustenance is bodily strength for a short period of time. God – great and glorious – Himself attends to creating the two modes of sustenance and is graciously disposed to convey both kinds, but “He extends sustenance to whomever He wills and decrees” (42:12).<sup>7</sup>*

If there was still any question about the breadth of *rizq*, al-Ghazali further states that the Divine name *al-muqit*, the Nourisher, “means the same as Provider [*al-razzaq*], yet this name is more specific, since provision includes what is other than food as well as food.”<sup>8</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as focus is given to eschatological and soteriological concerns, greater emphasis is placed on inward sustenance, though this in no way undermines the procurement of outward sustenance.

With regard to the study that follows, it is worth pointing out that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, despite his initial reservations, did not change his vocation as a religious scholar (*faqih*) upon becoming a Sufi (*faqir*), despite an alleged bifurcation between the religious scholar (*faqih*) and the Sufi (*faqir*). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah came from a long line of distinguished religious scholars (*faqih*) and “had gained a certain renown even though he was quite young.”<sup>9</sup> “To his joy, he learned from the Shaykh [al-Mursi] that his entry into the [Sufi] Path did not prevent him from pursuing his studies of the Law” and upon mastering the Sufi path he did not discard one mode of learning for the other, as can be seen from that fact that “he spent the remainder of his life as an honoured and well-known Sufi master and Maliki *faqih*.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, by mastering both the outward and inward teachings of Islam, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah justifiably received the title Crown of the religion (*taj ad-din*). In being both *faqir* and *faqih*, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is not alone amongst the Sufis, for many excelled in classical Islamic education as well as Sufi training. Numerous Sufi commentaries on the rites of Islam attest to this as they illustrate both the breadth and depth

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<sup>7</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>9</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

of knowledge crucial for the effective practice of such rites. Unlike many Sufi figures, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's mastery of Islamic law is widely acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> While this may be a factor contributing to the lack of scholarly analysis, establishing this would take us too far afield.

## ***Qur'anic Hermeneutics***

In contextualising Sufism within an Islamic paradigm it is necessary to understand the basis upon which it is founded, these being the Qur'an and the Hadith.<sup>12</sup> The Qur'an is taken as the immutable, irrefutable word of Allah revealed to Muhammad. Against this text all things are weighed, one reason that the Qur'an is also known as the Criterion (*al-furqan*). The justification for utilising the Qur'an as a criterion is itself a Qur'anic injunction.<sup>13</sup> The Qur'an, as the Speech of Allah, "is the *barzakh* or isthmus between man's intelligence and God's knowledge of things as they are in themselves ... whereby man can come to know things in themselves, without the distortions of egocentrism."<sup>14</sup> If this is true for the Islamic worldview, so too can it be seen within the general outlook of Sufism and many of those labelled "Sufis" explicitly assert this view. The above quoted statements of Junayd and Abu'l Hassan Al-Shadhili attest to this. Thus, while not distinct to the Shadhiliyya, Ibn 'Ata' Allah adheres to Abu'l Hassan's position of verifying his position by the Qur'an.

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, al-Ghazali is recognised for his mastery of both the exoteric and esoteric elements of Islamic law. This point can be further illustrated by the recognition of Ibn 'Arabi as a master of Islamic law is, if mentioned, rarely studied, despite his significant esoteric commentaries on the pillars of Islam within the *Futuhat al-makkiyya*. An exception to this is Faqih Sultan Nurasiah, "Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-'Arabi and Shari'ah" (MA diss., McGill University, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> While not alone in this view it is of note that the early community of Baghdadi Sufism has been viewed as being "best characterised as Ahl al-Hadith *culture*," name that these early Sufis were "owners of the interpretive conviction that the chief source of religious authority was the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet," Laury Silvers, *A Soaring Minaret* (Albany: Suny Press, 2010), 2. Thus, this established an early orthodox precedent of basing Sufic views on the Qur'an and Hadith.

<sup>13</sup> See verses including "if ye fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion (to judge between right and wrong), remove from you (all) evil (that may afflict) you, and forgive you" (8: 29) and "Blessed is He who sent down the criterion to His servant, that it may be an admonition to all creatures" (25: 1).

<sup>14</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: Suny Press, 1989), xv – xvi.

Part of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s Qur’anic hermeneutics is intimately connected to his primary soteriological method, which involves identifying and deciphering the signs. The Qur’an states “We have indeed made the signs clear unto you, if you would only use your reason” (3: 118) and that “on the earth there are signs [of God’s existence, visible] to all who are endowed with inner certainty, just as [there are signs thereof] within your own selves” (51: 20 – 21). These signs (*ayat*), for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, are existent so that the Oneness of Allah (*tawhid*) can be understood and affirmed through multiplicity. While they are evident upon the earth and within the individual, they can be seen to be concentrated within the Qur’an, as each verse (*ayat*) is a sign, and the text as a whole can be considered a book of signs. Through Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work it is apparent that deciphering these signs, being as they are the communication between Creator and creation, is a primary aspect of understanding and developing the soteriological status of the individual. While the signs (*ayat*) are there irrespective of their comprehension, the Qur’an states that “We have made all the signs manifest unto a people who are endowed with inner certainty” (2: 118). As a result of this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s Qur’anic hermeneutics and soteriological method can be seen to consist of a twofold approach which involves a) the development of certainty (*yakin*) for the individual to be able to read the signs and b) company with someone who is “endowed with inner certainty” so that the signs (*ayat*) can be indicated to the individual in order to develop their certainty (*yakin*).

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s hermeneutic method does not simply extrapolate on the meaning of particular passages. Rather, he utilises a hermeneutic method which highlights the multiple levels of meaning that arise from the specific phrasing of the Qur’an. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not simply state that the Qur’an does not contain this or that. At times, he analyses a phrase or sentence to highlight why it was not phrased in another manner. An example of this is his commentary on the verse 7: 201 where he rules out the inclusion of ‘and’, ‘then’, and ‘hence’ because all have, among other things, an allusion to a temporality that he says is inconsistent with the verse.<sup>15</sup> In another example, in commenting on the verse 4: 65, he points out that “He did not say, ‘But no, by the Lord,’ but rather, ‘But no, by your Lord,’ because in that wording there is a confirmation of the swearing and that sworn upon” which the other wording does not contain.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this passage cannot be worded in any other manner if it is to convey the intended meaning.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir fi isqatal-tanwir*, trans. in Ibrahim Hakim, *Illuminating Guidance on the Dropping of Self-Direction* (Virginia: Green Mountain School, 2007), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah utilises reason to inform his Qur'anic hermeneutics. Rational arguments are utilised in as far as they a) are secondary to revelation and b) affirm the revealed Word. This use of rational arguments within Sufi pedagogic methods is not unique to Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 465/1072), whose work the *Risala* is considered a major early Sufi text, believed that "Sufi Shaykhs should not shirk from using rational arguments in training their disciples when necessary."<sup>17</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah endorses this view, utilising rational arguments where necessary, condones irrational views, and at times proposes supra-rational ones. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "believers belong to one of two categories: those who have come to faith in God based on intellectual assent (*tasdiq*) and submission (*idh'an*), and those who have come to faith in God based on witnessing (*shuhud*) and direct experience (*'ayan*)."<sup>18</sup> Thus, for soteriological development, rational arguments are utilised in as far as they aid in achieving this goal.

The Qur'an is a difficult text. The themes that take precedence depend on the hermeneutical approach.<sup>19</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah's prime concern is soteriological. This focuses on the Creator's relation with, and disposition towards, creation. By taking soteriological development as a prime concern, it appears that Allah is disposed to display mercy and guidance towards creation<sup>20</sup> and that "the revealed Speech is dominated by the attributes of mercy and guidance."<sup>21</sup> A similar hermeneutic method is evident in al-Ghazali's comment that "there is no

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<sup>17</sup> In Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 259.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, trans. in Nancy Roberts, *The Subtle Blessings in the Saintly Lives of Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi and His Master Abu al-Hasan* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), 222 – 23.

<sup>19</sup> For an example of how chronology of revelation can be utilized see Mahmoud M. Taha, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 124 – 164. Within his work a distinction is made between the Meccan suras and the Medinian suras, highlighting a different, and complementary, emphasis in each phase of revelation.

<sup>20</sup> It is important to understand the reason for saying "disposed to display," for while Allah is not limited to behave in any particular manner, in referring to Himself with such names as the Most Gracious (*al-rahman*) and the Dispenser of Grace (*al-rahim*) He has agreed to display such qualities, for otherwise He would not make Himself known through these names. An example of Allah's disposition to display His mercifulness can be seen in the Hadith Qudsi where Allah states that "I have forbidden oppression for Myself and have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not oppress one another," in an-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith*, trans. Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2010), 80.

<sup>21</sup> Chittick, *Sufi Path*, xv.

evil in existence which does not contain some good within it, and were that evil to be eliminated, the good within it would be nullified, and the final result would be an evil worse than the evil containing the good.”<sup>22</sup> That Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is of a similar view is evident in statements such as “deprivation (*al-man’*) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of God in it.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s hermeneutic method emphasises the signs of Allah’s mercy. Taha’s Qur’anic hermeneutics distinguishes between the Meccan suras, which focus on the Oneness of Allah, and the Median suras, which focus on the codification of daily life, is useful here. While Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) tends to focus on the implementation of the codification of daily life, it could be stated that the focus of Sufi hermeneutics is on the embodiment of Allah’s Oneness within daily life. Critics of Sufism, both traditional and modern, attempt to make a case for Sufism’s heterodoxy by focusing on an apparent dichotomy between what is labelled “Sufi practices” and adherence to Islamic law (*shari’ah*). However, when the distinction between the two hermeneutic methods is understood, Sufism’s orthopraxy is apparent in as far as Sufi hermeneutics utilises the codification of daily life as a means to realise Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*). This is not to suggest that Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) downplays Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*), rather it highlights a difference between merely adhering to Islamic law (*shari’ah*), on the one hand, and utilising this law as a means realising and embodying the earlier Qur’anic message of Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*), found in the Meccan suras. While this explains, to some extent, the disjunction between the two hermeneutic methods, and the debates that ensued, this in no way overshadows other sources of conflict between these groups, such as vying for political favour, which, due to their complexity, cannot be covered here.

### ***The Science of Prophethood (ilm al-nabuwah)***

The view that Sufism is unsystematic overlooks the Sufi methodology known as the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). This involves the knowledge and implementation of the practices of the Prophet Muhammad. The focus on the practices implemented by Muhammad involves a distinction between the *Sunnah*, being the practices the Prophet implemented upon himself, and the *shari’ah*, being what can be extrapolated from them,<sup>24</sup> as they are commonly

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<sup>22</sup> al-Ghazali, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, trans. in Victor Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 37.

<sup>24</sup> This distinction is, perhaps, most clearly delineated in Taha, *Second Message*, 34 – 37, where he writes that the “Sunnah contains Shari’a and thus exceeds it.”

conflated. The Qur'an states "verily, in the Apostle of Allah you have a good example" (33:21), which can be taken as referring to Muhammad and his practices.<sup>25</sup> Again the Qur'an states "Say [O Prophet]: 'If you love Allah, follow me, [and] Allah will love you'" (3:31). Verses such as these strengthen the view that the Prophetic example is "'God-given' as opposed to being the fruit of human effort."<sup>26</sup> The result of this is, by basing oneself on the Prophetic model, a move away from self-centred worldview towards a God-centred worldview. By abrogating self-choice the individual moves from an affirmation of multiplicity that is implied therein towards an affirmation of Allah's unity (*tawhid*) through the constant adherence to Allah's choice for creation as it is evident within the Prophetic model. The process through which affirmation of Allah's unity (*tawhid*) develops within the individual is what is here meant by soteriological development. Whilst it is somewhat self-evident, Sufism's focus on the figure of Muhammad, to which countless texts and figures attest, places it within a uniquely Islamic paradigm.

Access to the prophetic practices relates to the transmission of the science of Prophethood. The transmission of the science of Prophethood has two aspects, one historical and the other trans-historical. The historical aspect involves the collection *Hadith*, which are the reports of the statements and actions of the Prophet "transmitted to posterity by his companions"<sup>27</sup> and later through "a chain of authorities (*isnad*),"<sup>28</sup> and their eventual codification into the authentic (*sahih*) collections. The foundations of the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*) are contained within the Qur'an and the *Hadith*, the latter of which record the *Sunnah*. Without delving into any of the debates that surround this body of literature, it is important to note the breadth of this literature and as such is bound to contain material that each reader will be unaware of. For this reason it is considered necessary to accompany someone who has assimilated the prophetic model in as far as it is possible to adhere to "the Prophet's etiquette, his moral and spiritual states, and, whenever possible, his inner realities."<sup>29</sup> This relates to the

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<sup>25</sup> For those who assert that Sufism predates Islam there is a similar proposition regarding the pre-Islamic prophets "indeed, you have had a good example in Abraham and those who followed him" (60: 4). However, it is important to note that this is phrased in past tense. From a practical position it follows that these examples are no longer accessible in as far as knowledge of their actions are, at best, fragmentary and thus incomplete.

<sup>26</sup> Karamustafa, "What is Sufism," 250.

<sup>27</sup> Victor Danner, *The Islamic Tradition* (New York: Amity House, 1988), 50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>29</sup> Vincent Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 199. It must be recognized that due to the difference between prophets, messengers, and others such imitation cannot be perfect in all aspects.

trans-historical aspect of transmission. Just as the *Hadith* were initially collected, passed on, and verified through their *isnad*, so too was the trans-historical transmission of the virtues and practices of the prophetic model transmitted through a chain of authorities known as a *silsilah*. A *silsilah* designates a “lineage that is in unbroken succession from the Prophet.”<sup>30</sup> With regard to the transmission of the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*) it should be noted that the historical aspect of transmission trumps the trans-historical aspect in as far as deviation from the historical aspect voids the salvific guarantee for additional practices not found in the prophetic model cannot be considered to affirm *tawhid* to the degree that they in the practices of a Prophet or Messenger.

In light of the soteriological centrality of the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*), the reasons why many Sufis take great pains to adhere to, and stress the importance of, the prophetic model becomes evident. It is not just in the adherence to the prophetic model in acts of prayer, fasting, or other acts of worship that it is important. It is recognized that “the imitation of the Prophet’s Norm, or *Sunnah*, in the performance of the rituals and in moral and social matters is what gives to the Islamic religion its rock-like stability throughout the ages” such that “of all the major religions still extant, Islam is the only one that is essentially the same now as it was in the days of its founder.”<sup>31</sup> From this it becomes apparent that a salvific guarantee exists to the extent that one embodies the prophetic model in all aspects of daily life and that “the relationship which is established between the saint and the prophet who is his model is not a vague ‘patronage’” for “it confers a precise and visible character on the behavior, virtues and graces” of the adherent.<sup>32</sup> For this reason many stories illustrating the extent to which some go to adhere to the prophetic model are taken to be preposterous, and therefore hagiographic. It may seem odd, or at best benign, when we hear the story of “a certain scholar who refrained from eating watermelons” because, while he knew that the Prophet Muhammad had eaten them, he was not aware of “how he had done so, and this is why he abstained from them.”<sup>33</sup> This illustrates an important soteriological principle, namely that actions made purely on self-choice are potentially detrimental in as far as they do not guarantee salvation. Even

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<sup>30</sup> Danner, *Islamic Tradition*, 241.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49 – 50.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sharrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 75.

<sup>33</sup> Imam ‘Abdallah Ibn ‘Alwi al-Haddad, *The Book of Assistance*, trans. Mostafa al-Badawi (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 51.



esoteric insights are to be subjected to this same yardstick if they are to participate in the salvific guarantee. This view is reinforced by Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili's statement that "if your mystical unveiling (*kashf*) diverges from the Qur'an and *Sunna*, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling."<sup>34</sup> As it is the prophetic model that is the guarantee of sanctity, *any* action or moral value that is not in accord with the example of the prophet it represents, from this perspective, has no salvific guarantee. As a result, in as far as those labelled "Sufis" adhere to the example of the Prophet Muhammad, the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*) acts as a safety net protecting the inherently Islamic nature of Sufism.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, this highlights the importance of the transmission of the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*). While the adherent will strive to embody the prophetic example there will undoubtedly be blind spots that can potentially limit further soteriological development. For this reason the expertise of someone who conforms to the prophetic model is necessary.

With regard to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, there is evidence that he too elaborates on the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). The Qur'an states "We have sent unto you an apostle from among yourselves ... to impart unto you revelation and wisdom" (2: 151). 'Revelation', in this verse, is a translation of *al-kitab*, literally the book, referring to the Qur'an. 'Wisdom' (*al-hikma*) here can be seen as referring to the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). The justification for this is in the fact that the Prophet Muhammad bequeathed to humanity the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah's first, and most famous, work, the *kitab al-Hikam*, literally 'The Book of Wisdoms', being essentially a collection of wisdom (*hikma*), can be seen, in this light, as an elaboration on the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*). It should be noted that the content of the *kitab al-Hikam* is not so much about the outward practices of the Prophet, but rather a commentary on the internal corollary of such activities. Thus, Ibn 'Ata' Allah can be seen to be contributing to the understanding and implementation of the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). Furthermore, this can be seen as being acknowledged explicitly in statements such as "Allah opened the way of guidance through the prophets and messengers, so those who came after them walked their path, and the true believers persisted

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Sha'rani quoted by Lory, "al-Shadhili," 171.

<sup>35</sup> This view has been maintained by subsequent Sufis, including Ahmad Zarruq (d. 899/1493) who, in clarifying and confirming this position, wrote that "there is no Sufism except through *fiqh*, because Gods exoteric laws (*ahkam Allah al-zahira*) can only be known through it; and there is no *fiqh* but through Sufism, for praxis (*'amal*) is only carried out through truthfulness (*sidq*) and an orientation towards the divine (*tawajjuh*)," in Vincent Cornell, "Faqih verses Faqir in Marinid Morocco," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Federick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 207. Ibn 'Ata' Allah confirmed and embodied this by combining his formal training with his Sufi training was simultaneously both *faqih* and *faqir*.

in following them.”<sup>36</sup> While acknowledging that a God-centred worldview was opened through all prophets and messengers for everyone to walk “their path,” Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that only “the true believers persisted in following them,” indicating that the salvific guarantee inherent in this path is only maintained through adherence to the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). By taking Muhammad as his prophetic model, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be taking an explicitly and exclusively Islamic paradigm as the basis for his work, and through which it needs to be seen if it is to be understood.

### ***The Importance of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah***

With the above-mentioned issues in mind, it could be stated that, with the type of analysis proposed here, the choice of Islamic thinker is somewhat arbitrary. Without denying this suggestion it should be recognised that utilising Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah as a case study fulfils several criteria for a study of this kind. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is well known and since his death in 709 AH/1309 CE, his works have been widely translated and read. He is historically important in that amongst the masters of the Shadhiliyya<sup>37</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was the first to compose treatises. It is not that the founder of this Sufi order (*tariqa*), Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili, or his successor, Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi, did not write or compose anything, as both are known to have written many letters and are renowned for their litanies (*hizb*).<sup>38</sup> However, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the third of the Shadhiliyya masters, has the honour of composing the earliest works on the Shadhiliyya teachings and methods. He also has a trans-historical importance, given that since their composition his works have been constantly studied by an ever increasing variety and number of people. Furthermore, despite his works being widely available within European languages, upon which this study relies, an analysis of these and their interconnections has been overlooked. In treating Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah as an intrinsically Islamic thinker the analysis developed here shows Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah to be a

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 60 – 61.

<sup>37</sup> It is necessary to distinguish between Shadhili, referring to Abu’l Hassan and often cited as Shadhili or al-Shadhili, and the Shadhiliyya, which refers to the Sufi order that was founded by Abu’l Hassan.

<sup>38</sup> For some examples of such material see Elmer H. Douglas, “Prayers of al-Shadhili,” in *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in Honour of Aziz Suryal Atiya*, ed. Sami A. Hanna (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Ibn al-Sabbagh, *The Mystical Teachings of al-Shadhili*, trans. Elmer H. Douglas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Abdullah N. Durkee, *The School of the Shadhdhuliyah: Volume 1 Orisons* (Malaysia: The Other Press, 2005).

uniquely Islamic soteriological cosmographer who deploys a soteriological semiotics in order to evoke within his adherents a performative cosmography.<sup>39</sup>

Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works are the first compositions on the Shadhili method, without which little would be known of the first three leaders of the Shadhiliyya order, Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili, Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi, and Ibn 'Ata' Allah himself.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it was the dissemination of his works, especially the *Kitab al-Hikam*, which helped popularise the Shadhiliyya. Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works also provide insight into the practice of Sufism. Regarding his works, Ibn Abbad of Ronda (d. 792 AH/1390 CE) wrote, in response to an aspirant, that "the book which you have by Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the *Kitab at-Tanwir*, comprises all that the books on Sufism, whether detailed or condensed, contain including both detailed explanations and concise expressions."<sup>41</sup> While Ahmad Zarruq (d. 899 AH/1494 CE) said that "the *Hikam* are to Sufism what the eyes are to the body."<sup>42</sup> More recently, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works have been used to "glimpse the ideas that were preached to the ordinary people"<sup>43</sup> in Mamluk Egypt and have been considered sufficient to stand as the sole representative of Sufism.<sup>44</sup> Without being exhaustive, it is evident that

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<sup>39</sup> An equally fitting description of Ibn 'Ata' Allah is Ian Almond's, "The Shackles of Reason: Sufi/Deconstructive Opposition to Rational Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 53 (2003): 26, description of Ibn 'Arabi as "a thinker who insists that God is both immanent and transcendent" and who was trying to escape "binary thinking about God." It could be stated that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works arise only as a result of such "binary thinking," which he is attempting, through his works, to correct.

<sup>40</sup> This is not to deny the value of Ibn al-Sabbagh's *Mystical Teachings* as a source of information on Abu'l Hassan, despite the fact that it was composed some time after the biographical *Lata'if al-Minan*. However, Cornell's, *Realm of the Saint*, 147 pejorative view that the *Lata'if al-Minan* "is mitigated by the fact that it was written as an apologia for the Egyptian branch of the Shadhiliyya" cannot be accepted for, among other reasons, no such apologia would be necessary. For another early biography of Abu'l Hassan see Kenneth Honerkamp, "A Biography of Abu l-Hasan al-Shadhili dating from the Fourteenth Century," in *Une voie soufie dans le monde: le Shadhiliyya*, ed. Eric Geoffroy (Paris: Maisonneuve, 2005). For studies of Abu'l Hassan's life prior to his migration to Egypt, see A. M. Mohamed Mackeen, "The Early History of Sufism in the Maghrib Prior to al-Shadhili (d. 656/1258)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91 (1971) and "The Rise of al-Shadhili (d. 656/1258)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91 (1971), and, to a lesser extent, Elmer H. Douglas, "al-Shadhili, a North African Sufi, According to Ibn Sabbagh," *The Muslim World* 38 (1948).

<sup>41</sup> In Mary A. K. Danner, *The Key to Salvation: A Sufi Manual of Invocation* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 16.

<sup>42</sup> In John Renard, *Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda: Letter on the Sufi Path* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986), 44.

<sup>43</sup> Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>44</sup> Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 194 – 197.

because of his importance, both historical and trans-historical, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works deserve attention.

Furthermore, beyond his importance, both historical and trans-historical, and the lack of modern scholarly analysis, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works are ideal for a study of this kind because they do not explicitly indicate any external influence. Whilst other Islamic thinkers explicitly discuss Greek or Indian philosophy and science or show a marked degree of influence, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, whilst not being alone, neither discusses or indicates any predominate influence from non-Islamic materials. The sources he quotes, the people he mentions, and the examples he raises are all devoid of any apparent external influences. For this reason it is somewhat easier to foreground Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s inherently Islamic approach than it is with others who show such influences.

### ***The Life of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah***

Taj ad-Din Abu’l-Fadl Ahmad b. Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Karim b. ‘Ata’ Allah al-Iskandari al-Judhami al-Shadhili, known simply as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, was born in Alexandria, Egypt, somewhere around the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> AH/ 13<sup>th</sup> CE century in Alexandria.<sup>45</sup> He was born into a “distinguished family of Maliki religious scholars,” of whom his grandfather was “either the founder or the reviver of a dynasty of scholars known as the Banu Ibn ‘Ata’illah.”<sup>46</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah “received a traditional Islamic education ... under some of the best and most illustrious teachers of Alexandria.”<sup>47</sup> He looked to be following in his grandfather’s footsteps “as an accomplished scholar in Maliki jurisprudence,” gaining “certain renown even though he was

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<sup>45</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 1; *Book of Wisdom*, 13; Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 2. For further biographical material see Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 1 – 12; *Book of Wisdom*, 13 – 28; Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 2 – 10; Durkee, *School of the Shadhdhuliyah*, 51 – 57; Maurice Gloton, *Traite sur le nom Allah* (Paris: Les Deux Oceans, 1981), 10 – 12; Riordan Macnamara, *La clef de la realisation spirituelle et l’illumination des ames* (Beyrouth: Albouraq, 2002), 15 – 26; George Makdisi, “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), vol. III, 722 – 23; Paul Nwyia, *Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah (m. 709/1309) et la naissance de la confrerie sadilite* (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1990), 18 – 35.

<sup>46</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 2.

quite young.”<sup>48</sup> Even though his father was a disciple of Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili, the founder of the Shadhiliyya, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was initially opposed to Sufism because “his fellow students had warned him that anyone who delved into Sufism would never master the Law.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, early in his education he was committed to becoming, and was recognised by others as, a renowned jurist (faqih).

The opposition to Sufism manifested itself in arguments with the students of Abu’l ‘Abbas al-Mursi,<sup>50</sup> the successor to Abu’l Hasan al-Shadhili.<sup>51</sup> This was until 674 AH/1276 CE when Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah attended a public lecture given by Abu’l ‘Abbas al-Mursi, whereupon he changed from an opponent to Sufism to one of Abu’l ‘Abbas al-Mursi’s most serious and promising students.<sup>52</sup> This change of heart came as a result of Abu’l Abbas’ knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which forced Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah to reassess the judgement of his fellow students. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was committed to both Sufism and religious law, becoming a master of both, teaching at “both the Azhar Mosque and the Mansuriyyah Madrasah in Cairo”<sup>53</sup> while simultaneously “devoted to his duties as a *shaykh* in the Shadhili order ... [being] considered

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<sup>48</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 9. Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 3 – 4, writes that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was “rather hostile to Sufism much like his grandfather ... but not for any definite reason”.

<sup>50</sup> On this figure see Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s *Lata’if al-Minan*; Douglas M. Dunlop, “A Spanish Muslim Saint: Abu’l-‘Abbas Al-Mursi,” *The Muslim World* 35 (1945); and Sobhi M. Botros, “Abu al-‘Abbas al-Mursi: A Study of Some Aspects of His Mystical Thought” (M.A. diss., McGill University, 1976).

<sup>51</sup> Cornell, *Realm of the Saint*, 147, challenges Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi as Abu’l Hassan’s successor. He states that the *Lata’if al-Minan*’s primary purpose, against the commonly held view that it captures the teachings of the founder and first successor of the Shadhiliyya, was “to legitimize the leadership of Abu’l-‘Abbas al-Mursi ... and, by extension, his successor, Ibn ‘Ata’illah”. While this comment is not upheld within other sources, it is understandable given comments that it was “through the circulation of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works the Shadhili Way began to spread in the Maghrib, which had rejected the master [i.e. Abu’l Hassan ash-Shadhili],” J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 50, and that that Cornell’s work examines a branch of the Shadhiliyya derived from the Tunisian, not Egyptian, lineage. While this may make his comments understandable, this does not make either Trimingham or Cornell correct. Furthermore, Cornell’s argument ignores the fact that Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi “upon his death bequeathed the order to two men,” Durkee, *School of the Shadhdhuliyyah*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 9; *Book of Wisdom*, 24; Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 6.

the foremost spokesperson for Sufism in the Mamluk capital.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, during his life, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was recognised as both *faqih* and *faqir*, being renowned for his knowledge of both the exoteric (*ilm az-zahir*) and esoteric (*ilm al-batin*) aspects of Islamic doctrine. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah became one of the successors of his teacher upon the latter’s death.<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah died in Cairo “at around sixty years of age in the middle of Jumanda II 709 AH/November 1309 AD.”<sup>56</sup>

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah lived during the Mamluk sultanate, which ended shortly after his death. While it is “impossible to know how many Egyptians actively joined Sufi orders,”<sup>57</sup> it is recognised that during this time Sufism in Cairo flourished.<sup>58</sup> Sufism was seen as “something quite distinct from the religious authorities of the Law”<sup>59</sup> and because of this “a kind of court protocol arose ... [for] those masters of the [Sufi] Path recognized by the state as the official spokesmen for the Sufi adherents.”<sup>60</sup> During this period in Egypt, Sufism became a reified class, distinguished by the bestowal of special titles, specific garb, and sectioning of the court seating, all of which demarcated the Sufi adherents from the other aspects of the community, each of whom had their title, garb, and seats. This reached the point where “in Mamluk society from the thirteenth century, the term Sufi could designate a legitimate professional occupation within the religious establishment.”<sup>61</sup> This exteriorisation of piety differed greatly from classical conceptions of Sufism as an interior struggle towards virtue. In contrast Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili abolished the ostentatious show of piety by encouraging the Shadhiliyya adherents to wear “no distinctive garments setting them apart from the world around them nor did they abandon

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<sup>54</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Durkee, *School of the Shadhdhuliyah*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> As can be seen from the number of Sufi Shaykhs listed on incomplete list of known Sufi Shaykhs in Mamluk Cairo, *Ibid.*, 79 – 82.

<sup>59</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> De Jong & Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, 6.

their professions or trades.”<sup>62</sup> This is one of the reasons that Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili’s methods were seen as a return to the way of the Prophet.

### ***Re-examining the Works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah***

This study of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview makes it possible to revisit the interconnections between his works. In doing so, it is useful to revise Danner’s overview that was quoted in full in the introduction. The interconnections between the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah will become more apparent as this work progresses, though it is useful to foreground and highlight the salient features of each work and, more importantly, through this highlighting their interconnections begin to become visible.

From the works that are available, there are:

- *Kitab al-Hikam* (The Book of Wisdom): This is perhaps the most widely known of his works. It is generally considered his earliest known composition. Consisting primarily of aphorisms, this work has often been the source of much contemplation and has inspired numerous commentaries. The *kitab al-hikam* is seen as a masterful summary of the lessons necessary for travelling the Sufi path.
- *Kitab al-Lata’if fi manaqib Abi l-‘Abbas al-Mursi wa Shaykhihi Abi l Hasan* (The Subtle Blessings in the Saintly Lives of Abu l-‘Abbas al-Mursi and His Master Abu l-Hassan): This biographical work records some of the sayings and litanies (*ahzab*) Shadhiliyya Shaykhs. All subsequent works on Abu l-Hassan al-Shadhili and Abu l-‘Abbas al-Mursi refer, to varying degrees, to the *Lata’if* and is an essential source for information on this period of development of the Shadhiliyya order. This work is also somewhat autobiographical, without which very little could be said about the life of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah himself.

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<sup>62</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*, 21. This integration into society contributes to the difficulty of determining the extent to which the Shadhiliyya spread.

- *Miftah al-falah wa misbah al-anwah* (The Key of Success and the Lamps of Spirits): While not the first to discuss the topic of Sufi invocation (*dhikr*), this work is the first to deal solely with this topic. Ibn 'Ata' Allah draws on the Qur'an and Hadiths, as well as earlier Sufis, to illustrate the necessity of invocation in attaining spiritual felicity. This work deals with both the general and technical aspects of invocation, covering such topics as its salvific necessity, the ailments that can be cured through the use of specific Divine names, as well as some of the etiquette (*adab*) that one should uphold within Sufi circles.
- *Kitab al-Tanwir fi isqat al-Tadbir* (Light on the Elimination of Self-Direction): As the title suggests, this work deals with the elimination of self-direction. Ibn 'Ata' Allah details how the elimination of self-direction (*isqat al-tadbir*) is necessary for the affirmation of Allah's Unicity (*tawhid*). In doing so, it is illustrated how this virtue elicits a plethora of virtues associated with the Sufi path, including, though not limited to, patience, sincerity, hope, fear, and love. This work abounds with the sayings of the first two Shadhiliyya Shaykhs and as such is another important source for understanding their teaching. As quoted above, it has been considered one of the most important works in traversing the Sufi path.
- *Al-Qasd al-mujarrad fi ma'rifat al-Isim al-Mufrad* (The Pure Goal Concerning Knowledge of the Unique Name): This work discusses various aspects of the Supreme Name, Allah. While all of his works are steeped in a metaphysics of Unicity (*tawhid*), this work draws out the ontological implications of this doctrine. In doing so, the relation of the Supreme Name, Allah, to the other Divine Names is discussed.
- *Taj al-arus al-hawi li-tahdhib an-nufus* (The Bride's Crown Containing the Discipline of Souls): Previously thought to be a composite work, this work is now considered to contain the sermons (*khutbah*) delivered by Ibn 'Ata' Allah to both students and non-student alike. It is deemed to contain the essential principles of Sufi, though stripped of the technical language and controversial topics found in other Sufi works, presented in a manner palatable for a general audience.



- *Unwan at-tawfiq fi adab at-tariq* (The Sign of Success Concerning the Discipline of the Path): This short work is a commentary on a Qasida of Abu Madyan. Through his commentary, Ibn 'Ata' Allah highlights the importance of the relationship between a Shaykh and their student (*murid*). In doing so there is a discussion of a) the importance of keeping company with individuals who are more spiritually advanced than oneself, b) the etiquette (*adab*) of keeping such company, and c) the importance of such etiquette.

## ***The Interconnections***

Despite being composed on different aspects of the Sufi path, there are some important interconnections between the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah is aware of such interconnections and almost encourages his readers to seek them out, as can be seen in statements such as “we have explained this statement in *Kitab al-Tanwir*, hence, we will not repeat our discussion of it here”<sup>63</sup> or that “we have stated the same truth in our book *al-hikam*.”<sup>64</sup> As a Sufi Shaykh of the Shadhiliyya and as a teacher of other Islamic fields, Ibn 'Ata' Allah understands the pedagogical value of indicating out such lines of inquiry while allowing his readers to gain the benefit of seeking them out for themselves. Yet, despite this, the extent of these interconnections has not been drawn out within contemporary works.<sup>65</sup>

It could be submitted that there are two ways of viewing Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre. The first, and perhaps most popular, is to view his works as merely a self-commentary on the *Kitab al-Hikam*.<sup>66</sup> Danner asserted this position, as can be seen in the statement that, in relation to the *Kitab al-Hikam*, “the other books of Ibn 'Ata'illah, such as the *Tanwir*, the *Qasd*, the *Lata'if*, and the *Miftah*, open up still further angles of insight.”<sup>67</sup> This view is supported by the fact that the *Kitab al-Hikam* is the earliest of his existent works and there are frequent allusions to it within his other works. However, despite the breadth of the *Kitab al-Hikam*, it is submitted that this

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<sup>63</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 244.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 262.

<sup>65</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>66</sup> This view is expressed throughout the introductions to translations to his other works, see Appendix 1.

<sup>67</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 17.

view is unsatisfactory for the following reason. Firstly, to some degree it discounts the value that each of his other works hold, making them, in a sense, a footnote to the *Kitab al-Hikam* rather than highlighting the salient features of each text. Furthermore, given Ibn 'Ata' Allah's reluctance to repeat himself, it is unlikely that he would write these other works if they were intended primarily to be commentaries on the *Kitab al-Hikam*. Thus, while there are some points of correspondence between the *Kitab al-Hikam* and Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other texts, it could not be asserted that there are any more interconnections between this work and the others than between any particular work and the rest of the oeuvre.

A second approach is to view each of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works as being equally important and examining what, if any, interconnections exist. This is the approach that has been made throughout this work and, as can be seen from the preceding study, while the primary concern of each work differs, the oeuvre, when taken as a whole, presents a consistent worldview that is dependent on an Islamic paradigm for cohesion and comprehension. The method of approach used here has been to draw attention to the cohesiveness of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's worldview while using the footnotes to highlight that a) this cohesiveness is consistent across each work and b) the areas within which interconnections can be made are cover the broad range of topics covered here. As can be seen within the preceding chapters, and in the outline of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works above, within each text there is a dominant theme, or it may be said that there is a predominant discussion of a particular domain. Nevertheless, as has been shown within this work, each domain is intimately interconnected, underpinned as it is by *tawhid*, and as such each work is interconnected providing a) a consistent worldview and b) an oeuvre that requires both an understanding of an Islamic paradigm and a familiarity with each of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works for a deeper comprehension and appreciation of each of this author's works.

Despite the popularity of the *Kitab al-Hikam*, it does not follow that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other works subsume a subordinate role to his earliest known work. Even though the *Kitab al-Hikam* is the most widely available of his works, an example of which can be seen in Appendix 1, it is not necessarily to be considered his most important, as can be seen from Ibn Abbad of Ronda's statement, that "the book which you have by Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the *Kitab at-Tanwir*, comprises all that the books on Sufism, whether detailed or condensed, contain including both detailed explanations and concise expressions."<sup>68</sup> While the *Kitab al-Hikam*'s breadth is not in dispute, it cannot be singled out as being the only work of Ibn 'Ata' Allah that covers a range of domains,

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<sup>68</sup> In Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 16.

as can be seen from both the preceding quote and the material discussed in the chapters above. This becomes increasingly apparent when Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion implicitly relies on matters discussed in other works, such as the nature of *tawhid*, implicit in *Unwan at-Tawfiq fi adab at-Tariq*, which connects the metaphysical and ethical domains. As a result, there are two reasons for favouring the second approach to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre. Firstly, the footnotes throughout the discussion of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works show, of the domains discussed, there is no domain that is the sole, exclusive subject of a particular text. Secondly, due to the centrality of *tawhid* to both an Islamic paradigm and Ibn 'Ata' Allah's worldview, there is bound to be interconnections that can only be drawn out if the texts are treated as being, to some degree, equally, rather than viewing certain texts as subordinate to one specific work. This supports the view taken here that each of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works are equally important and deserve equal weighting.

## Chapter 4 – Metaphysics

It could be suggested that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not have a metaphysics as he neither explicitly discusses nor uses the term. Moreover, like other Sufi authors, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work is underpinned by the principle of *tawhid*, the Oneness of Allah. It is from this principle that the multitude of things comes into existence, and to which they return. As Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah admits, Allah’s Oneness is difficult to grasp because a) it has, in and of itself, no opposite to contrast it against; and b) it is the foundation upon which all of creation (*khalq*) depends. Throughout his works, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah devotes many passages explaining how *tawhid* is to be understood and how its affirmation is to be maintained. Occupying, as it does, such a central and foundational position within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview, it is suggested that, when pared of all other concerns, the Oneness of Allah constitutes what is meant here by the domain of metaphysics and is what is intended by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics of *tawhid*.

Within the domain of metaphysics, provision (*rizq*) is simply not an issue because, on one hand, the self-existent principle is without need and thus does not require provision, and, on the other hand, the provision for all of existence is provided by the self-existent principle. However, in working out the details and consequences of these two positions *rizq* begins to become an issue. In this sense the domain of metaphysics is the source of the problem of *rizq*. Understanding the relationship between creation and Creator, especially in affirming and embodying this relationship, has been a prime concern for theologians, philosophers, and Sufis across the Islamic world, and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was no different in this regard. Through an examination of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics of *tawhid*, and teasing out the aspects that relate to the problem of *rizq*, it will be seen that, even in the texts that are not explicitly metaphysical, there is a complex interrelation between his works with Allah’s Oneness as a central tenet throughout.

### ***Definition of Metaphysics***

The word ‘metaphysics’ has no natural correlation in Arabic. As a result of this, “too often medieval Arabic metaphysics is regarded as either simply a paraphrase of or commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, or a curious and rather unsuccessful blend of Aristotelian metaphysics

and Neoplatonism.”<sup>1</sup> While this may be true for some figures, it is not true for all. While Arabic lacks a native word for metaphysics, the Islamic tradition is not devoid of metaphysical material. Too often discussions on metaphysics specifically, and philosophy in general, makes the Arabic writers to appear derivative and unoriginal, thus denying any intrinsic Islamic metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> While the influence of preceding philosophies, especially Greek cannot be denied, “one should remember that the Muslim sages accepted only such Greek wisdom as was compatible with the Islamic notion of *Tawhid*.”<sup>3</sup>

Metaphysics, as it is employed here, is understood as the sense of Being qua Being. ‘Being’ in this sense refers to the quiddity of Allah, a chief aspect of which is *tawhid*. There are two approaches that can be taken with regard to Allah’s quiddity, that of Allah’s transcendence (*tanzih*) and immanence (*tashbih*). In an attempt to understand *tawhid* it is useful to emphasise Allah’s transcendence (*tanzih*). In this aspect, Allah, in being beyond creation, is not part of the ontic scheme. The metaphysics of *tawhid* appears to be a cold and impersonal domain due to Allah’s transcendence (*tanzih*) and seeming detachment from creation (*khalq*), though, despite creation (*khalq*) being bracketed within the discussion here, it is seen to have a warmth and intimacy when integrated with Allah’s immanence (*tashbih*) for it emphasises the direct and personal connection between Allah and each individual. The metaphysics of *tawhid* is seen as being central to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview and is the foundation from which all other aspects of his thought develop, such that it can be said that “this is a far-reaching intellectual expression of intertwined experience and ideas which addresses ultimate and transcendent issues of cosmogony and cosmology, God and man, this world and the next.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thérèse Durart, “Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 327. An alternative to this is Ronald Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qur’anic Prophets* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), though it focuses specifically on Ibn Arabi’s *Fusus al-Hikam*.

<sup>2</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 1997), is an example of this as he views Islam as a melting pot of all that precedes it.

<sup>3</sup> Danner, *Islamic Tradition*, 159. Regarding Islamic philosophy it has been said to differ from other non-Islamic philosophies because the former incorporates “the idea that it is impossible to pursue wisdom without at the same time pursuing God,” Leaman, *An Introduction*, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics*, 3 – 4.

## ***Tawhid, the Oneness of Allah***

Like other Sufi writers, the Oneness of Allah (*tawhid*) is the central principle of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's metaphysics. For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, who quotes Imam al-Ghazali, "affirming the unity of God (*Tawhid*) is that one see all things as coming from God Most High" thus "preventing one from giving undue consideration to intermediate causes."<sup>5</sup> Though discussions of *tawhid* are considered to encompass a variety of differing aspects and it has been stated that

*Tawhid as used in Sufi literature means four different things. It refers, first, to a man's belief about God's unity, and consists essentially of some propositions about the nature of God and His relation with man and the world. These propositions may differ according to the believer's status, whether he is an ordinary man or a learned theologian. Tawhid refers, secondly, to disciplining one's life, internal and external, in light of one's beliefs. Here again there may be differences between individuals regarding the areas of life that they subject to discipline and the emphasis they may place on them. Tawhid refers, thirdly, to the mystical experience of unity or union. This tawhid is neither belief nor discipline, it is an affective experience differing in some ways from ordinary affective experiences. There are, as we have seen, different levels of this experience... Tawhid refers, fourthly, to a view of reality that arises from the mystical experience of unity. It is a combination of transcendental perception (mushahada) and belief, a philosophical construction of reality, of the relation of the Eternal, as the mystics put it, with the contingent in the light of the mystical experience.<sup>6</sup>*

While Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works encompass all four senses of *tawhid*, not all are equally prominent. This work can be seen as an attempt to explore the fourth sense of *tawhid* as it occurs throughout Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works in that *tawhid* acts as a foundation for his worldview. The current chapter is an attempt to explore Ibn 'Ata' Allah's views of the first sense of *tawhid*,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah wa Misbah al-Arwah*, trans. in Mary A. K. Danner, *The Key to Salvation* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Ansari, "Doctrine of One Actor," 48 – 49. Ansari's, *Ibid.*, 49, view is that *tawhid* in the fourth sense "is not found in the earlier Sufis" and that it started with al-Junayd (d. 298/910). Whilst it may be true that al-Junayd's writing are the earliest expression of a worldview founded on *tawhid*, both al-Junayd and the Shadhiliyya would reject the view that it is not found in earlier Sufis or in earlier Islamic communities, for both explicitly founded their doctrines on the Qur'an and *Sunna*.

especially in as far as it provides the framework of later discussions. The second sense of *tawhid* can be seen as the process through which an individual must pass in order to arrive at an affective experience of *tawhid* in the third sense. As Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works were composed for pedagogical purposes he is less concerned with explicating the third sense than he is with aiding individuals through the second. Thus, while the affective experience of *tawhid* is touched on, it is not explicitly explored within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works nor will it be done so here.

This chapter is primarily concerned with Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion of that which he considers essential to understanding Allah's Unicity. For this he quotes freely from the Qur'an and Hadith, though his discussion is not limited to it. He also uses logical proofs to argue for the metaphysical necessity of only one God, to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Ibn 'Ata' Allah asserts that soteriological success depends, not only on knowing the relevant Qur'anic material, but also on knowing and understanding the rational proofs of Allah's singularity.

### ***Tawhid in the Qur'an and Hadith***

From the opening chapter which states "Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid" (1: 5), the proclamation of *tawhid* in the Qur'an is repeated throughout. "There is no deity save Him" is repeated several times, including minor variations in the phrasing,<sup>7</sup> confirming *tawhid* as a central doctrine. According to the Qur'an it was also the central tenet of the teaching of the pre-Islamic prophets and messengers. Noah said "worship Allah alone: you have no deity other than Him" (7: 59), which is repeated by Hud (7: 65), Salah (7: 73), and Shu'ayb (7: 85). The declaration of *tawhid* is made even more forceful when stated in second person "your god is the One god" (16: 22) and "your only deity is Allah" (20: 98), culminating in the injunction to "say: He is the One God" (112: 1). Ibn 'Ata' Allah affirms this view, writing that "God's prophets and messengers teach others on His authority in order that others may likewise be gathered together on the basis of His divine oneness."<sup>8</sup> For Ibn 'Ata' Allah it is not enough to know that Allah's Unicity (*tawhid*) is one of the central tenets of the Qur'an, for him it is necessary to understand the implications of this tenet.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, verses including, but not limited to, 2: 255, 3: 18, 7: 59, 11: 14, 16: 51, 20: 98, 23: 23, 23: 166, 47: 19, 59: 22. This is not an exhaustive list and only lists verses that contain this explicit expression, and minor variations thereof.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 10.

## ***Understanding “there is no god but Allah” (la ilaha illa’llah)***

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, understanding what is meant by the *kalimah tawhid* (lit. words of Oneness) is a central aspect of understanding *tawhid*. This is partly because bearing witness to “there is no god but Allah” (*la ilaha illa’llah*) is integral in the daily life of every Muslim. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah highlights the centrality of this phrase in stating that “it is mentioned in thirty-seven passages in the Qur’an.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, amongst others, it is important to understand exactly what is meant when one asserts *la ilaha illa’llah*. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that the obligation to understand this phrase arises because “He [Allah] requires His servants to affirm His singularity.”<sup>10</sup> By analysing its linguistic nuances, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah illustrates that *la ilaha illa’llah* is the expression and affirmation of Allah’s Unicity (*tawhid*) in the simplest form. As has been stated, “By saying *la ilaha* (‘there is no deity’), one says ‘no’ to every sort of pseudo-deity, and by saying *illa’llah* (‘but God’), one says ‘yes’ to God alone.”<sup>11</sup> From this understanding of *la ilaha illa’llah* Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah develops his metaphysics of *tawhid*.

The first element, and the one most contentious for grammarians, is that of negation, *la*, no. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that according to grammarians, “when *la* (no) is joined to an indefinite noun, it signifies a general negation,” negating both the few and the many.<sup>12</sup> Yet, this would mean that it would not be correct to add “but one or more” to the negation. If this were the case, then the phrase can be conceived as having ellipsis, such that it could express ‘we have no divinity but Allah’ or ‘there is no divinity in existence but Allah’. With regard to the former statement, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah points out, it “would not have the meaning of True Unity.”<sup>13</sup> It does not have the meaning of true unity because, while this statement asserts that we have no other God, it includes the possibility that others might.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 146.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Bilal Sambur, “Prayer in the Psychology of Religion with Special Reference to al-Ghazali, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Iqbal,” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2000), 221.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.



As to the statement that ‘there is no divinity in existence but Allah’ this includes the negation of divinity in both essence and existence, depending on how the phrase is understood. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “it is known that the negation of essence is more powerful in affirming Unity than the negation of existence,” and as such focuses the examination of this sentence in the sense that it negates essence.<sup>14</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah proposes two options, essence and existence are either the same or they are different. If they are the same then the negation of both results in absolute nonexistence, which is absurd. However, if they are different then it is possible to negate the essence of divinities other than Allah. If their existence is negated this merely negates their actuality, but not their potentiality. Whereas, if *la illaha illa’llah* is understood to negate the essence of deities other than Allah, then this is *tawhid* for not only does it deny the actuality of other deities, but also their potentiality.

The next element given attention is *illa*, but or except. In highlighting the possible meanings of *illa*, in order to determine the correct one, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah cites the Qur’an, “if there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides (*illa*) Allah then verily, there would have been confusion in both” (21 :22). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah argues that, given the possibilities, the meaning of *illa* in this sense is equal to *ghayr*, other than, rather than meaning ‘exception’.<sup>15</sup> The reason for this is that in the latter case, *la ilaha illa’llah* becomes “there are no divinities from which God is to be excluded”, which is not an expression of Unity.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, if *illa* is equated with *ghayr* then the phrase is understood to express ‘there is no divinity other than Allah’. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah points out that as it is “agreed that it conveys the meaning of pure Unity; so it is necessary to ascribe to *illa* (except) the meaning of *ghayr* (other than).”<sup>17</sup>

Finally there is the affirmation. After the negation of all deities, the sentence *la ilaha illa’llah*, as an expression of *tawhid*, affirms the existence of the one sole Deity. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, in examining the grammar, states that it is in keeping with the logic of the sentence that “in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 133 – 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 134.

apposition one rejects the first part of the phrase and accepts the second,” as in this instance the apposition *illa'llah*, except Allah, is in the nominative case.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is in keeping with the grammatical form of the sentence that the existence of Allah is affirmed. However, as Ibn 'Ata' Allah is quick to point out, there are some who hold that “the exception from negation is not an affirmation.”<sup>19</sup> For when there is “both a judgement of non-existence as well as the negation of non-existence ... this exception might conceivably go back to the judgement of non-existence” such that “the exception remains undiscussed and unevaluated as either negative or affirmative” without certainty.<sup>20</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah concedes that the sentence *la ilaha illa'llah* is not recognition of the existence of Allah, but rather “a declaration negating the remaining deities.”<sup>21</sup> He admits that while the meaning of the affirmation is conveyed through a conditional, such that the meaning becomes ‘if there is any god then it is One Allah’, it does not contradict the general meaning of the sentence. It does, however, change the wording of the sentence and this is unacceptable because “abandoning whatever the wording might be is a contradiction to the general meaning.”<sup>22</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah's response is that, while the sentence *la ilaha illah* is an implicit affirmation of the Oneness of Divinity, the explicit affirmation of Divinity is a precondition of this sentence, without which it makes no sense as it comes “through the grasp of a principle of language.”<sup>23</sup>

Ibn 'Ata' Allah goes further, showing the necessity of the negation preceding the affirmation, while maintaining the priority of the latter. Before showing the priority of the affirmation of Divinity, Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that “the concept of non-existence and negation is impossible before the concept of affirmation, because non-existence is unintelligible except in relation to a specific thing.”<sup>24</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah gives three reasons for the priority of the affirmation of the sole Divinity in *la ilaha illa'llah*, one grammatical, two symbolic and metaphysical. He writes that negating divinity other than Allah Most High and then affirming it “in regard to Him” is more

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 137.

emphatic “than affirming it of Him without negating it in other-than-Him.”<sup>25</sup> Next, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “every man has one heart and one heart cannot be occupied with two things at the same time,”<sup>26</sup> which is evocative of the Qur’anic verse which states that “never has God endowed any man with two hearts in one body” (33: 4), an allusion that would not have been lost on his audience. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s point is that this exclusion means that whenever an individual is concerned with anything other-than-Allah, they are excluded from being concerned and aware of Allah, which should be one’s prime concern if they are to develop soteriologically. It is for this reason, writes Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, that for “the one who says *la ilaha illa’llah* that he intend by *la ilaha* the expulsion of what is other-than-Allah from his heart” so that the “authority of God is present therein.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, following on from this, the negation of other-than-Allah is seen to be a precondition of the affirmation of Allah Most High, just as “ritual purity precedes prayer” or “cleaning a house of dirt precedes the arrival of a king therein” and for this reason it is necessary that “*la ilaha* precede *illa’llah*.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the phrase *la ilaha illa’llah* is the simplest expression of the affirmation of the Oneness of Allah.

## ***The Proofs of Tawhid***

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the proof of *tawhid* is clearly stated in the Qur’an. The Qur’an, as the irrefutable word of Allah, states, regarding Allah’s Unicity “your God is the One God: there is no deity save Him” (2: 163). For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this is sufficient proof for accepting Allah’s Oneness, as can be seen from his writing,

*For me, the supposition of the existence of two deities is rationally impossible, because the Divinity is One Who has the attributes of Majesty and Beauty, both dynamically and passively. Then who is there other-than-*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 137. This has been recognised by Sambur, “Prayer in the Psychology,” 222, who writes that “the *tawhidic* world view of Islam is the best proof of this principle, since *il ilaha illa’llah* cannot accommodate anything ‘other-than-God’ in human nature and the universe.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 137. It is possible to see from this one of the reasons that the phrase *la ilaha illa’llah* is utilized as a *dhikr*, and even seen as the best form of *dhikr*, for cleaning the rust of heart and bringing about the presence of God therein. This is further discussed in the chapter on soteriology.

*He? In the 'other-than-He', those attributes are acquired from Him. Thus, the Divinity is naught but One, and He is Allah, as is evidenced through His Words (may He be exalted!). 'If there were, in the heavens and the earth, gods besides God, then verily, there would have been confusion in both . . .'*<sup>29</sup>

Beyond this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah presents numerous proofs illustrating the logical necessity of the Oneness of Allah, to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Given the above quote, their inclusion cannot be considered as attempting to verify the truthfulness of the Qur'an; rather, in line with his overarching concern, they can be seen to be included because their knowledge is necessary for soteriological development. On this Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that on condition of having belief in Allah's Oneness, it is necessary to "back up this belief with decisive proofs."<sup>30</sup> At the same time, these proofs of *tawhid*, in reaffirming the above mentioned material from the Qur'an, are an aid to understanding, affirming, and accepting the Qur'an as the irrefutable word of Allah.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah's proofs take two formats, one intellectual and the other traditional.<sup>31</sup> Of the intellectual proofs, most follow the method of reciprocal hindrance (*tamau'*). In utilising this method Ibn 'Ata' Allah follows a consistent format generally beginning with "if we assume two deities." Ibn 'Ata' Allah introduces an attribute of Allah and shows that it is logically inconsistent to apply this attribute to two things simultaneously. While Ibn 'Ata' Allah does not state this anywhere, it follows that he is aware that in refuting the assumption of two deities he also refutes the assumption of three or four or more as these would elicit the same absurdities as the existence of two. Furthermore, a refutation of *tawhid* only requires a proof of the existence of two deities and for this reason the inclusion of any more into the argument does not alter the result.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah first considers the quality of being the "master over all possibilities."<sup>32</sup> In supposing two deities, Ibn 'Ata' Allah wonders about the result of two deities desiring opposing

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 138 – 39, quoting the Quran 21: 22. In this quote Ibn 'Ata' Allah follows Abu al-Hasan Ash-Shadhuli, whom he has quoted as saying "We view God with the perceptive powers of faith and certainty, which has freed us from the need for evidence and proof," Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 140 – 146 and 146 – 148 respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 140.

things, i.e. one “wanted Zaid to move while the other wanted him to be still.”<sup>33</sup> Both of these hypothetical deities cannot be a “master over all possibilities” because both outcomes cannot occur “due to the impossibility of combining two opposites.”<sup>34</sup> Zaid either moves or he does not, either way the will of one deity will overcome the other, which “would require the predominance of one of the two equals without any predominating element; and this is absurd.”<sup>35</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah then raises the possible objection that this opposition of wills is not necessary due to their knowing “all things knowable” and their possession of the wisdom of “what is good and not good” such that both deities agree to will the same thing, avoiding contradiction.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah accepts the validity of this objection but replies that “it is merely conceivable, not real.”<sup>37</sup> His reason for doing so involves a transition from strictly logical considerations to metaphysical ones, replying that it is absurd to assert that a deity wills something merely because it is good, for that would mean that “the deity would be the result of his deeds, not the creator of them.”<sup>38</sup> This response is not as far removed from the logical proof as it first seems. For Allah to be “master over all possibilities” means that what is willed is not subject to anything, whether it be another deity or the concept of the good, for if it was then Allah would be limited to certain possibilities, not master over them. According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, to hold otherwise the consequence is plain, namely that as “Allah is transcendent above having others share in the choice with Him ... whoever pretentiously claims to have any personal choice alongside Allah is one who associates (*mushrik*), who claims Lordship for himself.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, there cannot be two or more masters over all possibilities.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah repeats this argument, each time focusing on a different attribute of Allah including self existence, omnipresence, omnipotence, and the like. Each time Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah examines one of these qualities he argues that since it is logically impossible that these qualities

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 12.

be ascribed to two or more existents then the Unicity of Allah (*tawhid*) is affirmed. For example, if two or more deities have the power over all possibilities, then either one has more power than the other, in which case it cannot be affirmed that both have power over all possibilities. Furthermore, it is absurd that if they agreed on a possible creation “then the power of one of them would not be worthier to create than the other” as both have the power over all possibilities.<sup>40</sup> For any particular possibility, a deed would either be dependent on one deity and independent of the other or vice versa, which would mean that it is “in need of both and yet is in no need of both,”<sup>41</sup> which is absurd, “hence, the existence of two deities is impossible.”<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, if they disagree then one would prevail, meaning that the other is weak, or if they do not disagree then they are both weak, as their decisions would be depend on each other, both of which are unacceptable because “the weak cannot be a deity.”<sup>43</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, these arguments all point to the Unicity of Allah (*tawhid*).

One quality that covers a number of these proofs is self-existence. The first, and most obvious, argument against two, or more, self-existents is that “each would have to be a partner to the other in existence and at variance with him in himself.”<sup>44</sup> While embracing and including elements from the previous arguments the necessity of variance adds some new elements and possibilities. In the case of assuming of two deities, existence would consist of a compound, yet “that through which the partnership comes about is other than that through which the variance occurs.”<sup>45</sup> As existence depends on the partnership of two, or more, deities, these deities cannot be considered as self-existent as they depend on each other for this partnership, which is extraneous to both deities.

If the above argument was not sufficient for rejecting the possibility of two or more self-existent deities, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah examines the quality distinguishing the self-existent beings. In doing so, he aims at putting the impossibility of multiple self-existents beyond doubt. Either

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<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 141.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 142 – 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 143.

that which distinguishes these deities is an attribute of perfection or it is not, or it is of considerable importance or it is not. In the former case, if distinction is a result of an attribute of perfection, then, by being devoid of the distinguishing attribute, the deities are imperfect. If the distinction is not the result of an attribute of perfection, then, being an attribute of imperfection, the deities are imperfect. Either way “the imperfect cannot be a god.”<sup>46</sup> In the latter case, if the quality is of considerable importance in distinguishing divinity, then the one devoid of this quality is not a god. If the quality is not of considerable importance “then being distinguished by it is not necessary” and a distinction is still required. This lack of distinction is proof that this is not a deity for “he who is in need is one who lacks and is not a deity.”<sup>47</sup> While this does not exhaust the intellectual proofs offered by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it is evident that throughout these arguments the sole aim is to show that positing more than one deity is metaphysically and logically incorrect. As a result, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be clearing the ground so that a solid foundation is established.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is aware that, while these are arguments to disprove the possibility of multiple deities, they do not explicitly assert the existence of one Sole Deity. For this traditional proofs are necessary, all of which are taken from the Qur’an. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, some of them are self explanatory, such as “Your God is One God; there is no deity save Him” (2: 163), “Say: ‘He is God, the One’” (112: 1), “God says: ‘Do not take two gods, for He is only One God...’” (16: 51). In passages such as these the assertion of one sole Principle to the exclusion of any others is self-evident. In other Qur’anic passages Allah’s attributes are mentioned. In these instances Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah provides commentary illustrating how each passage is an assertion of *tawhid*. Two examples of this kind of proof are the verses “He is the First and the Last...” (57: 3) and “everything will perish save His countenance” (28: 88). With regard to the passage “He is the First and the Last...” (57: 3), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that to be the First is to be “the One without antecedent”<sup>48</sup> so that if one were to say “the first slave I buy will be freed” and then proceeds to purchase two slaves simultaneously it is not incumbent on them to free either “because the first must be a single person” and any subsequent slaves purchased will be kept too “because the first must be prior to the others.”<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s point is that “when God Most High describe Himself as being the First, it is incumbent that He be unique and prior to all else;

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 146.

hence, this requires that He not have a partner.”<sup>50</sup> Hence, Allah’s being the First is taken to be indicative of Allah’s Unicity.

As to the passage “everything will perish save His countenance” (28: 88), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah reminds his readers that “whatsoever is non-existent, and then comes into being, cannot be eternal,” as the eternal cannot possibly be non-existent and “what is not eternal is not a god.”<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s argument is elliptical and his readers are left to tease out the implication. This argument follows the line that since only His countenance does not perish, nothing else can be considered eternal, and thus there are no partners alongside of Allah. It may be objected that this proof merely mirrors the intellectual proofs, in that it rejects the possibility of multiple eternal existents. However, by affirming the existence of “His countenance,” this proof not only rejects all possible partners but also affirms the existence of the Oneness of Allah. While this does not exhaust Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s traditional proofs, it does convey the intent and form of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s hermeneutics in that it aims to place this conception of *tawhid* at the centre of the Qur’an.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah accepts unequivocally that “the Divinity is One Who has the attributes of Majesty and Beauty.”<sup>52</sup> This is important, for when these proofs are elucidated the reader knows that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah has no doubt about the validity of the Qur’anic passages. When Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah quotes the passage “if there were, in the heavens and the earth, gods beside God, then verily there would have been confusion in both” (21: 22),<sup>53</sup> then the reader can see that the aim of the proofs is to remove any such confusion on the part of the reader. If Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s goal is not limited to elucidating a sound metaphysical foundation, it is also directed to developing the necessary basis for such a foundation. For without a solid foundation anything that is built is suspect. The relation of these proofs to the discussion of *la ilaha illa’llah* is integral. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that, as a condition of affirming *la ilaha illa’llah*, one “back up his belief with decisive proofs, unless he is not from among the people of contemplation, unveiling, and revelation.”<sup>54</sup> However, understanding the decisive proofs, like those examined above, is not

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 139.



the goal.<sup>55</sup> The final condition of affirming *la ilaha illa'llah* is "to be from amongst the people of contemplation, unveiling, and revelation."<sup>56</sup> Thus, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, understanding and affirming *la ilaha illa'llah* is pivotal for soteriological development.

Being "from amongst the people of contemplation, unveiling, and revelation"<sup>57</sup> is considered the pinnacle of human achievement. Throughout his works Ibn 'Ata' Allah encourages his readers to aspire to become from amongst this group and his books can be seen to be written to help others achieve this goal. To be from amongst this group means one's "worship of God becomes sincere."<sup>58</sup> Sincerity in worship means "he does not turn to anyone but Him, nor does he have hope in or fear other than Him, nor does he see harm or benefit except as coming from Him" to the point that "he abandons whatsoever is not He."<sup>59</sup> This culminates in ridding oneself of "inward and outward associationism (*shirk*),"<sup>60</sup> which can be seen as being the pinnacle of affirming and embodying *tawhid*. The degree of subtlety involved might not at first be apparent. Beyond the obvious attribution of partners to Allah, Ibn 'Ata' Allah quotes Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi as having said "kindness is a veil which conceals the One who is Most Kind."<sup>61</sup> Regarding this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah comments that "kindness is a veil when one finds repose in it and is tempted to be content with the kindness itself."<sup>62</sup> This is further emphasised in quoting al-Wasiti's statement that "the enjoyment of obedience is a deadly poison," to which Ibn 'Ata' Allah explains that enjoyment of obedience often results in a missed "opportunity to demonstrate sincere devotion" as one's devotion continues "because of the sweetness and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah seems to share al-Qushayri's view who "in describing the principle stages of man's progress towards the Creator ... identifies the first as positioning oneself vis-a-vis God (*muhadara*). The mystic in the state of *muhadara* still remains 'behind the veil' of the discursive proof (*burhan*) and of the workings of the intellect (*aql*)," whereas later "discursive reasoning (*burhan*) gives way to the irrefutable and ultimate proof (*bayan*)," Knysch, *Islamic Mysticism*, 312. This giving way to "the irrefutable and ultimate proof" could be likened to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion of certainty (*yakin*). See chapter 3 below.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 139.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 276.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 276.

enjoyment that you find in them” and “not out of loyalty to your Lord.”<sup>63</sup> Finding repose in kindness or the sweetness of devotion is contrary to *tawhid* for it treats contingent things as an end, whereas to affirm *tawhid* is to know that “with God is all journeys’ end” (3: 28). Without skipping ahead, it is important to see, as is discussed below, that, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, affirming *tawhid* entails, as far as possible, embodying it in such a way that one’s intentions correspond with one’s words which correspond with one’s actions and one’s actions are such that they do not place anything alongside Allah. Anything less would be considered associationism (*shirk*).

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is careful in asserting that being “from amongst the people of contemplation, unveiling, and revelation”<sup>64</sup> is the final goal. He is quick to add that “the science of unveiling has no end to it,”<sup>65</sup> and that the “truth is that the Gnostic sciences have no limit.”<sup>66</sup> This is important, for to state otherwise would be inconsistent with the metaphysics of *tawhid*. In provoking a response to this Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah asks “how can it be conceived that something veils Him, since He is the One (*al-Wahid*) alongside of whom there is nothing?”<sup>67</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah answers

*The Real (al-Haqq) is not veiled from you. Rather, it is you who are veiled from seeing It, for, were anything to veil It, then that which veils It would cover It. But if there were a covering to It, then that would be a limitation of Its Being: every limitation of anything has power over it. ‘And He is Omnipotent, above His servants’.*<sup>68</sup>

To claim to have reached the point beyond which there is no further unveiling would entail implicitly claiming that Allah is limited and would contradict the verse “every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way” (55: 29). Yet, as the proofs have shown, this is inconceivable and logically impossible. Rather, while the “science of unveiling” has no end, the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 139.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 29. Quoting the Qur’an (65: 7).

individual has a limit and the infinite cannot be apprehended by the contingent. For each individual, as the above aphorism shows, is veiled beyond their limit.

However, this metaphysics of *tawhid*, while affirming the limitless unveiling for the creation, affirms that the Creator is not at any time, or in any sense, veiled. Ibn 'Ata' Allah inquires "how can it be conceived that something veils Him, since He is the one who manifests everything,"<sup>69</sup> to which he responds that, due to the nature of Allah's Unicity, "He appears even in those entities through which He is veiled" such that "there is, in reality, no veil."<sup>70</sup> In denying creation through affirming *la ilaha illa'llah* "attention is turned away from the created universe only with respect to its creatureliness, not with respect with the Truth's appearance therein."<sup>71</sup> The result is that it is "not to His failure to appear in everything but rather, to their [creation's] inability to perceive Him in everything."<sup>72</sup> *Tawhid* is not an effacement of creation, rather the contingently existent creation must acknowledge their contingency for "[earthly] causes must needs exist, while at the same time, one must be absent to them in order to witness [the Divine causality behind them]."<sup>73</sup> Thus, it is Allah's Unicity that veil's creation from perceiving His Oneness.

### ***The Goal of Tawhid***

While it is necessary, according to Ibn 'Ata' Allah, to "back up belief with decisive proofs,"<sup>74</sup> this is not the goal. Beyond belief or faith (*iman*) there is certainty (*yaqin*) and one of the purposes of the proofs employed by Ibn 'Ata' Allah is to develop certainty. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "all certainty entails faith, though not all faith entails certainty" as "the difference between them is that while faith might be attended by heedlessness, such is not the case with certainty."<sup>75</sup> The

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>70</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 49.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 139.

<sup>75</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 47.

distinguishing mark of certainty's (*yaqin*) superiority over faith (*iman*) is that the former entails knowledge attended by action, whereas the latter only entails the affirmation of such knowledge, hence the potential for heedlessness. The importance of knowledge coupled with action will become apparent through the discussions on ethics and soteriology. However, it is important to keep in mind that, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, faith and belief, and, as will be seen below, even certainty, are not ends-in-themselves, but are a means to realise the relationship between the Absolute and the contingent, the One and the many.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that the fruit of the affirmation of *tawhid* is "trust in God."<sup>76</sup> For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, this trust, while informed by various proofs, is not theoretical or abstract. This kind of trust in Allah is one that is embodied and enacted. Ibn 'Ata' Allah asserts that "your striving for what has already been guaranteed to you, and your remissness in what is demanded of you, are signs of the blurring of your intellect (*basira*),"<sup>77</sup> emphasising that one's motivation should be correctly orientated. Focusing on "what is demanded of you" ensures the affirmation of *la ilaha illa'llah* because it emphasises the performative aspect of embodying and enacting *tawhid* without alterities like "striving for what has already been guaranteed." The kind of trust in Allah being advocated for involves abstaining from intermediaries, as is seen from "the abstinence of the elect ... [which] includes, for example, their wariness of relying on any being but God, inclining in love towards anything or anyone other than Him, or aspiring to anything but His grace and goodness"<sup>78</sup> or finding repose in kindness rather than "the One who is Most Kind."<sup>79</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah further writes that "detachment from the world arises solely from genuine trust in God, while genuine trust in God arises solely from faith in God based on a personal vision of and encounter with Him."<sup>80</sup> The encounter that Ibn 'Ata' Allah mentions engenders trust in Allah through the realisation of His Unicity and creation's inherent ontological poverty.

Closely aligned to trust in Allah, is being pleased with Him. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that being "pleased with Allah" means that one "has submitted to Him, and yielded to His order, and left

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<sup>76</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 109.

<sup>77</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 155-56.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

his control to His leadership.”<sup>81</sup> Commenting on the Qur’anic verse “God has bought of the believers their lives and their possessions, promising paradise in return” (9: 111), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states “you have no management or authority over what you do not own.”<sup>82</sup> At first glance this may appear self-evident, however, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah made the comment in connection with the Qur’anic verse to indicate that as our lives and possessions have been bought, we, in reality, have no authority over them. The importance of this is that if one has trust in Allah, then one should be pleased with His choice regarding “their lives and their possessions.” Allah’s closeness to each and every creation is evident through His having power and choice over every course of action, the result of which is that “the intimacy of His nearness makes him absent from the perception of the afflictions.”<sup>83</sup> Awareness of this intimacy indicates a perception of the mercy that extends from the Absolute to the contingent, such that “for whoever is deprived and knows that the deprivation is a mercy to him, then that deprivation is in reality a gift.”<sup>84</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is indicating that Allah’s choice, irrespective of whether one conceives it as a trial or not, is directed to enabling the individual to recognise the source of all action. However, implicit within this is that the knowledge required to be content with Allah’s choice, thus being pleased with and trusting in Allah, is to know that all contingent creation has the selfsame source, that is, knowledge of *tawhid*. As the goal of *tawhid* is its affirmation, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be establishing what is here called a soteriological semiotics with Allah revealing Himself to creation through creation.

While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics may seem to be world denying it should be kept in mind that Allah “appears even in those entities through which He is veiled.”<sup>85</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “attention is turned away from the created universe only with respect to its creatureliness, not with respect with the Truth’s appearance therein”<sup>86</sup> such that the world’s “only blameworthiness is what keeps you away from Allah and from dealing with Him.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 49.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>87</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 75.

Soteriologically, the denial of creation only occurs to the extent that one is unable to perceive the Divine causality behind it. On this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “not all who seek the world are blameworthy, but only the one who seeks it for himself and not for his Lord.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, while two actions may appear outwardly similar, they can differ greatly in their intention, which is the criterion against which they are judged for “the reward of deeds depends upon the intentions.”<sup>89</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s position regarding the world is that “it is not totally blameworthy without exception, and neither is it totally praiseworthy without exception.”<sup>90</sup> To the extent that perception of the Divine pierces the veil of creation the world can be affirmed due to its Divine underpinnings. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah cannot be considered world denying for he recognises that it is within the world that one comes to know and affirm *tawhid*. Secondly, if either praise or blame is attributed to creation it should be examined to see how it either highlights or covers the Divine.

Furthermore, the type of trust that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is advancing stems from the deepening awareness of creation’s, and thus one’s own, total contingency. The understanding of *la ilaha illa’llah* that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is promoting extends beyond what is commonly assented to when *tawhid* is affirmed. He writes that “ordinary people only sense their great need of God in the face of certain distressing life events” because “their vision is dominated by the realm of sensory experience” such that, due to this veil, their “need of God” is fleeting.<sup>91</sup> However, this misses a vital point of the relationship between Allah and creation in that “the creature’s need for God is a function of the servant’s essential nature, since he is a contingent being, and every contingent being is in need of an external source of supply.”<sup>92</sup> In elaborating in the servant’s essential nature, he writes that “among the requirements of servitude are the following: manifesting need of Allah, and standing before Him with the quality of poverty, and raising the aspiration (*himma*) from other than him.”<sup>93</sup> It is for this reason that “the saint is constantly in distress,”<sup>94</sup> for they know that their need of Allah is not fleeting and “the imperative need (*al-*

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>89</sup> al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad M. Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), # 1.

<sup>90</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 193.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>93</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 59.

<sup>94</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 193.

*idtirar*) of the Gnostic never vanishes, nor is his repose (*qarar*) in anyone but God.”<sup>95</sup> To awaken creation’s awareness of their contingency “the Truth afflicts them with [outward] conditions which alert them to their need of Him.”<sup>96</sup> This culminates in the constant awareness of creation’s contingency and their need for Allah, while embodying qualities that ensure that associationism (*shirk*) is avoided.

## ***Implications of the Metaphysics of Tawhid***

It has been shown that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics is founded on the Oneness of Allah (*tawhid*). Central to the metaphysics of *tawhid* is to bear witness (*shahid*) to the testimony of faith (*shahadah*) “there is no god but Allah” (*la ilaha illa’llah*). For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this involves more than mere lip service, as a sincere affirmation involves embodying Allah’s Unicity. However, accepting this involves a seemingly irreconcilable rift between abandoning all that is other-than-He and continuing one’s everyday existence since this requires an ontology that is underpinned by a non-ontic entity. This discussion will be confined to the topic of provision (*rizq*) in order to draw out the implications of the metaphysics of *tawhid*. One outcome of this metaphysics of *tawhid* is that, irrespective of the domain, unicity underpins every discussion. While confining this discussion to provision (*rizq*), it will be seen that, on all levels, *tawhid* plays a crucial role in both developing the problem and defining the solution. In highlighting some of the implications of this metaphysics of *tawhid* it should be acknowledged that these issues are developed and examined in greater length in later chapters.

In examining the metaphysics of *tawhid* its ontological implications become apparent. This may seem like a slight digression, but the importance of the concept of the descent of Being (*tanazzul*) cannot be understated. While a full understanding of this descent is not possible within this work, it is possible to cover the pertinent aspects. *Tanazzul* is the descent of the Essence (*adh-dhat*), which is unknowable, through the Divine Names (*asma’ Allah*), and Attributes (*sifat*) to the corporal world (*al-dunya*).<sup>97</sup> The descent of Being (*tanazzul*) is often

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<sup>95</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 38.

<sup>96</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 195.

<sup>97</sup> For a further discussion see Khaja S. K. Khan, *The Secret of Ana’l Haqq* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1992), especially chapter one through eight, and Abd al-Karim al-Jili, *Universal Man*, trans. Titus Burckhardt and Angela Clume-Seymour (Gloucestershire: Beshara Publications, 1995), especially chapter one through six.

portrayed as a hierarchy with each tier having its own internal hierarchy. An example of this is that the names of Allah (*asma' Allah*) are covered by the Supreme Name 'Allah' for it "refers to the essence which unites all attributes of Divinity, so that none of them is left out, whereas each of the remaining names only refers to a single attribute."<sup>98</sup> The top-down approach shows the descent of Being (*tanazzul*) as a sort of map showing the hierarchy of existence. However, this map can be inverted such that the possibility of a return or reintegration becomes evident. With regard to the individual the Qur'an states "We create man in the best conformation and thereafter We reduce him to the lowest of the low" (95: 5-6), which sets up the entire soteriological endeavour. The "best conformation" entails being witness to the reality of *la ilaha illa'llah*. The human being, having experienced this descent (*tanazzul*), is compelled to regain their "best conformation." While human beings cannot escape their contingency, they may shed their baseness by re-establishing an awareness of the relationship between the Absolute and the contingent. While Ibn 'Ata' Allah does not express it in this manner, it is implied within his works and informs his discussions of provision (*rizq*).

The importance of an understanding of the Divine descent (*tanazzul*) becomes apparent when it is acknowledged that the distinction between Creator and creature is the site of the problem of *rizq*. Allah, being the Creator and source of all existence, cannot be divorced from the creation for this would mean that creation is separate, which conflicts with *tawhid*. Allah is both transcendent, for "there is nothing like unto Him" (42: 11), and immanent, for "wherever you turn, there is God's countenance" (2: 115). While creation is manifest by and through the grace of Allah, its nature is such that it is taken as an end in itself and its source is obscured. On this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "the Cosmos (*al-kawn*) is all darkness" and "is illumined only by the manifestation of God (*zuhur al-Haqq*) in it."<sup>99</sup> He further states that it is not possible that "the heart be illumined while the forms of creatures are reflected in its mirror."<sup>100</sup> His point is that those who stop at the creation, without acknowledging the Creator "in it or by it or before it or after it,"<sup>101</sup> do not affirm *tawhid*. Given Allah's Self-sufficiency it is absurd that there could be a lack or want, even though from the perspective of creation the pursuit of *rizq* is necessary.

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<sup>98</sup> al-Ghazali, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 51.

<sup>99</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 25.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



The heart of the problem of *rizq* is this: if Allah is Self-Sufficient and Allah is the only true existent, then why is *rizq* necessary? The short answer is that the problem of *rizq* involves a domain error. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah asserts that one must “know that things have a certain being in the foreknowledge of Allah” and that “the Real takes charge and regulates its affairs while it is in His foreknowledge.”<sup>102</sup> *Rizq* is only a problem without an understanding of the ontic hierarchy. A sufficient understanding of the ontic hierarchy is implicit in the affirmation of *tawhid* as presented by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. Though, it is evident from the extent that this arises throughout his works that this common problem arises as a result of a lack of knowledge. It is clear from this chapter that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics, rooted as it is in *tawhid*, is not only aware of the problem of *rizq* but also has an answer. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s answer to the problem of *rizq* involves fleshing out the implications of *tawhid* across domains, including ontology, epistemology, eschatology, and soteriology.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 19.

## Chapter 5 – Ontology

If the metaphysical domain is the source of the problem of *rizq*, then the ontological domain is the site of the problem. Within the metaphysical domain, *tawhid* means that there is no opposite or opposition to Allah as a result of His Self-sufficiency. However, the corresponding ontological extension of this metaphysics of *tawhid* involves an arena wherein provision is pursued, attained, and consumed, opposites appear to attract and repel, and opposition appears to be an overwhelming experience, though only for the contingently existent. If the metaphysics of *tawhid* can be typified as harmony, then, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, one of the key traits of the ontological domain is disjunction. Within this domain all things, due to their inherent contingency, are placed under strain as they arise within their boundaries. However, rather than renouncing the world, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges its existence and advises that things should not be given more attention than they are due. It can be seen that this approach stems directly from his understanding of *tawhid* as “there is no god other than (*ghayr*) Allah,” for to reject creation is to reject Allah’s appearance therein. The result is that creation is acknowledged, though only as far as it gives rise to the perception of the Divine. Due to its ontological contingency, creation has an inherent ontological poverty. This means that the contingently existent has no control over its, or anything else’s, inherent contingency. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it will be seen that this inherent ontological poverty is a crucial factor in both a) highlighting the relationship between Creator and creation and b) opening the possibility of contact between creation and Creator.

The distinction between the metaphysical and ontological domains is not necessarily obvious, though it is seen to play an important role within the writings of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. Metaphysics, as it has been used here, refers to the principles of existence as they are within themselves, prior to ontic existence, the chief for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is, as discussed, *tawhid*. To distinguish the ontological domain from the metaphysical is important as the former deals primarily with manifestation, i.e. ontic entities, whereas as the later is, in a sense, independent of manifestation.<sup>1</sup> To make this distinction clearer it could be stated that the metaphysical domain encompasses the potentially possible, i.e. that which is or will be manifest, as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> al-Junayd described the final state of *tawhid* as “an experience of nearness (*qurb*), rather than union,” Ansari, “Doctrine of One Actor,” 51. This pre-empts Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view for it indicates that Allah cannot be reached by a contingent creation in either an ontological or teleological sense if it is taken as understanding Allah’s essence as a non-ontic entity.

potentially impossible, i.e. that which is possible for Allah to manifest though has no possibility of being due to the limitations Allah has placed on Himself with regard to His creation. The potentially impossible is limited due to such things as His mercy superseding his wrath (7: 156) and His not burdening his creation with more than they can bare (2: 286) and other such Self-imposed limitations which are stated in the Qur'an and the Hadith. As a result, the ontological domain is limited to the potentially possible.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the choice of stressing the potentiality of any possibility or impossibility is deliberate, for the necessity of anything other than Allah would impose limitations on Allah and remove Allah's quality of being, amongst others, the all powerful (*al-qadir*), which, as previously discussed, would mean that what is being referred to is not God.

Within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works the ontological domain, comprising of that which is potentially known, is considered to be the source of all knowledge of Allah for His creation. However, as it comprises of, in a sense, the first veil on the ipseity of Allah, the ontological domain is the source of tension between the Absolute and the contingent's apprehension thereof. While the metaphysical domain, typified by *tawhid*, is a domain of undifferentiated, uniform harmony, the ontological domain is punctuated by the tension involved in differentiating Creator and creation. It will be seen that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion of what is here called the ontological domain encompasses the twofold importance of this domain, that of containing the contingent's knowledge of Allah whilst being the site of their distinction.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, a correct understanding of the ontological domain is crucial in as far as it prefigures all potential soteriological development. The centrality of the ontological domain with regard to his soteriology lies in this domain being an isthmus (*barzakh*) between the metaphysical reality and an individual's epistemological apprehension of it, either aiding or hindering the harmonious interplay between the Absolute and the individual. To avoid any disjunction between the Absolute and the individual, so as to avoid contradicting *tawhid*, Ibn 'Ata' Allah can be seen to deploy a soteriological semiotics. As stated, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics arises as an aid to affirming and embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

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<sup>2</sup> On this Ibn 'Arabi states that "the ontological 'evil' that creatures meet derives from their possibility (*al-imkan*) – their ambiguous ontological situation halfway between the Necessity of Sheer Being and the impossibility of sheer nothingness," William C. Chittick, "Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-'Arabi's Eschatology," *The Muslim World* 79 (1988): 78 – 79. Thus, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's view that there is no inherent evil can be seen to be a consequence of the ontological expression of *tawhid*.

As it is through creation that Allah communicates with creation, it is within the ontological domain, being the site of disjunction between Creator and creation, that his soteriological semiotics becomes an invaluable tool for aligning the individual's epistemological outlook with the metaphysical reality.

Intimately tied to, and implicit within, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion of the *kalimah*, that is no god but Allah (*la ilaha illa'llah*), is the second half of this *kalimah* is Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah (*Muhammadur rasulu'llah*). This can be seen to express two things. Firstly, it can be taken to describe how the Absolute relates to the contingent, that is, how the metaphysics of *tawhid* is expressed ontologically. The message of *tawhid* expressed in *la ilaha illa'llah* is conveyed to creation through the Messenger in *Muhammadur rasulu'llah*. Secondly, it illustrates how the contingently existent can affirm the metaphysics of *tawhid*. That is, by following the Messenger of Allah, it is possible to act in accordance with the preference of Allah. This chapter will focus on the first of these two implications.

### ***From Essence (dhat) to Existence (kawn)***

The description of descent from essence (*dhat*) to existence (*kawn*) is not explicitly discussed by Ibn 'Ata' Allah in the available texts. However, in order to understand the content of this chapter it is necessary to briefly clarify the relationship between the essence (*dhat*) and creation (*khalq*), for the latter does not proceed directly from the former. In clarifying this, the discussion will briefly go beyond the bounds of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's writings, though, in order maintain the focus on his work, this discussion will remain brief. However, it should be acknowledged that the relationship between, and descent from, the essence and existence was not unknown to Ibn 'Ata' Allah, as can be seen from the many allusions made to this subject throughout his work that this chapter draws on, nor would he have been unfamiliar with the authors that will be drawn on for this material, as can be seen from the fact that "the list of books used by both Shaykhs [Abu'l Hassan and Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi] is quite impressive and indicative of the high calibre of their religious instruction."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's defence of Ibn 'Arabi illustrates familiarity with and comprehension of the latter's works, many

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<sup>3</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 11.

of which clearly discuss the descent from Being to being.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons the following brief discussion of the relationship between the essence and existence is not beyond the scope of either Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works or his knowledge.

Many Sufis agree on the difficulties of expressing the relationship between essence and existence. Part of this difficulty is due to the limits of language in expressing that which encompasses and surpasses language. This is one of the reasons the relation between essence and existence is said to have an inherent mystery.<sup>5</sup> Creation (*khalq*) is not seen to proceed directly from the essence (*dhat*) for "nothing is brought into being directly from the One (*ahad*); rather existence comes about from oddness or singularity."<sup>6</sup> A distinction is made here between *ahadiyyah* on the one hand and *wahdah* and *wahidiyyah* on the other. While *ahad* and *ahadiyyah* are commonly understood as the One and Oneness respectively, it is better understood as the Supreme Unity or the 'outward' aspect of the Essence (*dhat*). With this, it is possible to understand that the reason that multiplicity does not proceed directly from the *ahad* is because this level is isotropic and further 'descents' are necessary before the metaphysical unity is expressed as an ontological totality. *Wahdah* is situated between the Supreme Unity (*ahadiyyah*) and the outward Oneness or Singleness (*wahidiyyah*) where the Essence is conscious of the Names and Qualities. It is outward, not in the sense of being separate from, but in as far as it has a contingent ontological extension. Thus, in the Qur'an it states "His being alone is such that when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, 'Be' – and it is" (36: 82). This is the site of the contingent ontological extension.

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<sup>4</sup> An example of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's familiarity with Ibn 'Arabi can be seen in his debate with Ibn Taymiyya, see chapter 10 below and Muhammad H. Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine According to Ahl al-Sunna* (Mountain View: As-Sunna Foundation of American, 1996), 372 – 379.

<sup>5</sup> On this inherent mystery David Burrell, "Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 142, states that "any pretension to have articulated the founding relationship [between Creator and creation] will have reduced that relation to one comprehensible to us, and so undermine and nullify the distinction expressed by *tawhid*" for this distinction states that "everything which is not God comes forth from God yet cannot exist without God, so how are they distinct." Ibn 'Ata' Allah explicitly acknowledges the inherent inexpressibility of this and, because of this, can be seen to shift the focus away from this to the immanent soteriological issues.

<sup>6</sup> Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito in Ibn 'Arabi, *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries*, trans. Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2001), 99.

The Arabic word for “be” (*kun*) reflects the mysterious and ineffable relation between Allah’s essence (*dhat’illah*) and his creation (*khalaq*). This word is made up of three letters, *kaf* – *waw* – *noon*. The *kaf* corresponds to “the One in relation to Its Essence”, the *noon* corresponds to “the relationship of the One to the World”, while the *waw* is “the link which connects both aspects of the One.”<sup>7</sup> This link, the *waw*, is hidden since it does not appear in the written form and thus encapsulates the mysterious distinction between Creator and creation. Furthermore, the letter *waw* “signifies ‘and’, which is the link between two aspects”<sup>8</sup> and, within this context, includes both aspects of an isthmus (*barzakh*), both joining and separating, in the same sense as the ontological domain is an isthmus between the metaphysical and epistemological domains. Interestingly, this means that “the word k[u]n, therefore, represents all that is manifest and nonmanifest.”<sup>9</sup> Regarding this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah quotes a poem he heard Abu’l Abbas recite, which states:

*And when He appears to you, know that you are not He,*

*Nor, indeed, are you anything but He.*

*Two entities which have not been united, but herein lies*

*A mystery which we are hard pressed to explain.*<sup>10</sup>

This succinct and poetic summary aptly shows two key points. Firstly, it illustrates the difficulty, even for figures such as Abu’l Abbas and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, of expressing the finer points regarding the relationship between the Creator and creation. Secondly, it supports the view that the preceding comments, despite not being explicitly discussed by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, would not have been beyond the scope of his understanding.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>9</sup> Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship Between God and the World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 314.

## ***The Isthmus (barzakh)***

To understand the mystery of unity in multiplicity it is useful to understand the isthmus (*barzakh*). The isthmus (*barzakh*) is a hidden barrier between any two things. In the three times it occurs within the Qur'an "it signifies a limit or a barrier that separates two things, preventing them from mixing with each other."<sup>11</sup> However, it is important to note that "at the same time, by preventing the two entities from mixing with each other, the isthmus (*barzakh*) also provides for their unity."<sup>12</sup> Just as a veil conceals and in doing so reveals something about what it is concealing, so too does the isthmus (*barzakh*), in separating two entities, creates the point of contact between the two entities. Ibn 'Ata' Allah refers to the Prophet Mohammed as "the most splendid *barzakh*"<sup>13</sup> and the "supreme, all-encompassing *barzakh*."<sup>14</sup> This follows from "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" (*Muhammadur rasulu'llah*) as indicating the point of contact between Creator (*al-khaliq*) and creation (*khalq*). This part of the *kalimah* is taken as indicating that the prophetic model is the means to Allah in that, by following the Messenger, it is possible to draw close to the source of the message. On this Ibn 'Ata' Allah has stated that "he [Muhammad] is the intermediary between God and us, our guide to Him, and our means of knowing Him through gnosis."<sup>15</sup> Thus, "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" (*Muhammadur rasulu'llah*) indicates the meeting point between Creator and creation and the limit to which creation may approach their Creator.

The understanding of Muhammad as an isthmus (*barzakh*) also relates to the Science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nubuwwah*). In general terms the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwwah*) has two key aspects, a) the implementation of the practices of the prophet of a religion by the adherents of that religion, and b) the transmission of this knowledge. The knowledge and implementation of the prophetic practices is central because the prophets and messengers are seen as the models par excellence for knowing Allah in all states, while the accurate transmission of this knowledge is crucial for maintaining access to the salvific guarantee of

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<sup>11</sup> Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabi's Barzakh*, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 369.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 95.

knowing Allah in all states. In being a point of contact between the Absolute and the contingent, the model set out by Muhammad, if followed, allows for a similar point of contact between the Absolute and the particular individual implementing the model. It is necessary to say that further points of contact are similar for several reasons, chief of which is the fact that Muhammad was appointed to act as a prophetic model, and thus it is divinely perfected within him, while for subsequent individuals the degree to which they come to embody this model will differ greatly. Ibn 'Ata' Allah is acutely aware of this fact, for he states that "the lights which are manifest in the friends of God derive from none other than the radiance of the lights of prophethood ... the Muhammadan reality is like the sun, while the hearts of the saints are like moons."<sup>16</sup> The likeness of Muhammad to the sun and those who follow him to moons are indicative of Muhammadan model being the source of contact between the Creator and creation, while the saints, in following this model, reflect this contact to the degree that they embody this prophetic model.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, Muhammad is the supreme isthmus (*barzakh*) because of his elevation over the other prophets and messengers. On the one hand, Muhammad approached Allah "until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer" (53: 9). On the other hand, Muhammad's elevated status is due to the fact that "the Real attached His Name (of Lord) to Muhammad", referring to verse 4: 65, "whereas He attached Zakariyya's [Zechariah's] name to Him", referring to verse 19: 2, "so that the slaves may know the difference between the two stations, and the inequality of the two degrees."<sup>17</sup> In the figure of Muhammad there is both aspects of the isthmus (*barzakh*), for his approach demarcates the separation between the Absolute and the contingent, while Allah's attaching of His Name to Muhammad illustrates the meeting point of the Absolute with the contingent. Whereas, Zakariyya's name being attached to the Real marks a point of contact and not the limit of the possible contact.

## ***The Role of Creation***

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, creation is not meant to be an end-in-itself. Underpinned as it is by *tawhid*, creation has ontological existence so that it can act as a means to affirm its metaphysical basis.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 3.



For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this partly indicates that knowledge arises through opposites, as can be seen in statements such as “sometimes darknesses come over you in order that He make you aware of the value of His blessings upon you” and “he who does not know the values of graces when they are present knows their value when they are absent.”<sup>18</sup> Within the metaphysical domain, *tawhid* has no opposite and as a result it requires multiplicity for its affirmation. The point of creation, and the ontological domain, is to signify that which underpins it. However, this is not an intrinsic quality of creation for “if created entities do lead [us] to God, they do so not out of some capacity which they possess in and of themselves ... for nothing can lead to Him but His own divinity.”<sup>19</sup> This refers back to the inherent tension within the ontological domain. For, in Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view, creation is an indication of its Creator, though only in as far as the Creator has bestowed this capacity on them. Furthermore, this quote also hints at the paradoxical position given to creation within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s ontology, namely of being both the source of knowledge of Allah whilst being the source of distraction from Allah.

As Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah sets up the relation between creation and the Creator, he does not renounce creation in the sense of denying its value. He is aware that each individual’s interaction with Allah is mediated by creation. He writes that “the Truth afflicts them with [outward] conditions which alert them to their need of Him,”<sup>20</sup> which culminates in the awareness of the constancy of this need. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah further adds that “if God, glory be to Him, wishes to give a servant something, He gives him a sense of his need to seek it from Him.”<sup>21</sup> However, implicit in this is the awareness that existence is too often taken to be an end-in-itself and creation is to be shunned in so far as it hinders the awareness of *tawhid*. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah charts a fine course between immersion in creation and its rejection. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states “do not stretch out your hand to take from creatures unless you see that the Giver (*al-Mu’ti*) amongst them is your Lord”, however “if such is your case, then take what knowledge says is suitable for you.”<sup>22</sup> This is a clear indication of the twofold nature of creation of being both a veil on Allah as, in this example, the Giver (*al-Mu’ti*), while being the site at which Allah’s giving takes place. This can

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<sup>18</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 50.

be seen to culminate “when you see the Doer in all you see all being as agreeable.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, creation is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad and is only so in as far as it blinds or aids the perception and awareness of its Divine underpinnings.

A consequence of this intense focus on *tawhid* is that it gives rise to utterances that are liable to be misconstrued. An example of this is the saying attributed to Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi:

*Lead people to God, and nothing else. He who leads you to this world has deceived you, and he who leads you to [good] deeds will wear you down; but he who leads you to God has counselled you aright.*<sup>24</sup>

The potential for confusion within this statement arises due to the focus within Islam being on the accumulation of good to be placed within the scales on the Day of Judgement. The point is the “goodness” of deeds, as it is not a value intrinsic to them, can hinder the perception of Allah’s actions and attributes moving the created realm. Similarly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah shares this sentiment in stating:

*Let not obedience make you joyous because it comes from you, but rather, be joyous because it comes from God to you. “Say: In the grace of God and in His mercy, in that they should rejoice. It is better than that which they hoard.”*<sup>25</sup>

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be implying that even good deeds, “which they hoard,” are insignificant unless it is understood that they are a grace that “comes from God to you.” Despite the potential for reading these statements as being unorthodox, both Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and his teacher are ensuring that Allah is given primacy without a second, thus affirming the ontological manifestation of *tawhid*.

Creation in Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre seems to have a semi-paradoxical ontological status. It is apparent that creation does not have a necessary existence, for if it did it would exist eternally

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<sup>23</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq fi adab al-Tariq*, trans. in Aisha A. R. at-Tarjumana, *Self-Knowledge: Commentaries on Sufic Songs* (Capetown: Madinah Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 218.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 33. Quoting the Qur’an (10: 58).

alongside Allah, thus contradicting *tawhid*. Yet, at the same time, it is not ontologically non-existent for this goes against common experience. Thus, in order to affirm *tawhid* and its implications, it becomes necessary to deploy a sort of ambivalence towards the manifest realm. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah sums up the paradoxical ontological status and the subsequent ambivalence in stating that “when we renounce this earthly realm, we are thereby affirming its existence, since we testify to its existence by renouncing it.”<sup>26</sup> In the act of renouncing creation there is an admission, or more correctly attribution, of inherent existence in creation. This act, however subtle it may be, contradicts *tawhid* in that it posits the existence of something other than Allah. On this Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “if you have true understanding, you will know that there can be no abandonment of that which has no existence.”<sup>27</sup> That is, it is impossible to abandon anything that has existence independent of Allah, as the metaphysics of *tawhid* allows for no such thing.<sup>28</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen here as continuing the view of Abu’l Hassan al-Shadhili who forbid his adherents from wearing any particularly “Sufi” garb, as had become a custom in the courts of Egypt, for any appearance of renunciation was an indication that creation had, for that individual, an intrinsic value in as far as it needed renouncing.<sup>29</sup> Thus the asceticism of the Shadhiliyya could be seen to play on two conceptions of *zuhd*, that of renunciation and nonattachment.<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, through his soteriological method, can be seen to be advocating nonattachment, for to renounce something, even though it is negated, is to, albeit subtly, place that thing alongside of Allah, which contradicts *tawhid*.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 226.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>28</sup> From this it is understandable why, central to the monotheistic religions, it is forbidden to worship false gods. The Divine mercy is considered to be capable of forgiving any and all acts that have dependent existence because they are, in a sense, real. Whereas the worship of deities independent of the one Divine principle cannot be forgiven because they have no reality.

<sup>29</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Mokrane Guezzou, *Shaykh Muhammad al-Hashimi: His Life and Works* (United Kingdom: Viator Books, 2009), 185n.9. On this point, the Shadhiliyya position again echoes that of al-Junayd whose view was that “renunciation is not so much freedom of the hand from the possession of property, money or goods, as it is freedom of the heart from being possessed by these things and of the mind from being distracted from God,” Ansari, “Doctrine of One Actor,” 38.

Despite their privileged epistemological status among ontologically contingent beings, humans have no ontologically privileged status. Ibn 'Ata' Allah records Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi as stating that

*Human beings came to exist after having not existed, and they will cease to exist after having existed. From both ends, therefore, they are nothingness. It follows, then, that they are, in essence, nothingness.*<sup>31</sup>

And that

*Indeed, we see no creature. After all, is there, in all of existence, anything but the True Sovereign? And even if we must acknowledge other entities, they differ little from the fine dust particles in the air which, when you examine them carefully, you will find to be nothing at all.*<sup>32</sup>

The second statement is more understandable in light of Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili's statement that

*The Sufi is someone who, in his inward being, sees human beings as so much fine dust in the air – neither existent nor non-existent – just as they are in the knowledge of the Lord of the worlds.*<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the ontological status of humans does not differ from the status of any other contingently existent object. Yet, this seems to contradict the Islamic view that extol the virtues of the human over the other creations, such as the Qur'anic verses which state that "verily, We create man in the best conformation" (95: 4) and that "He imparted unto Adam the names of All things" (2:31). These comments are understandable when it is seen that the human, as a contingently existent being, is one creature amongst creation and, as such, does not deserve any special consideration. However, in terms of soteriological potential, which can be seen to be central to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's work, the human is unique amongst creation. It is for this reason that "since all beings participated in receiving existence and sustenance, Allah wanted to differentiate some from others, to show how vast and far-reaching His will is."<sup>34</sup> Thus, while,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 261.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 261 – 62.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 65.

ontologically, all of creation is the same, one aspect of Allah's communication with creation can be seen through the differentiation between creations.

However, it should be noted that, as Abu'l Hassan is quoted as stating, the focus of the individual's perception should be on the "inward being" of a Sufi rather than their outward actions. One reason for this is that one's inward being includes the relationship between the ontological and metaphysical domains, whereas one's outward being includes their relationship with other similarly ontologically contingent beings. The interaction of creatures within the ontological domain is dependent on sets of proscriptions and prohibitions, which result from the metaphysics of *tawhid*. While these are discussed below, it is important here to understand why Abu'l Hassan makes the distinction between the individual's inner and outer being. As all of creation is inherently ontologically contingent, creation cannot but interact outwardly with creation. Yet, individuals have an inherent potentiality to internally perceive that this outward interaction is an aspect of Allah's communication with creation. To decipher this communication between Creator and creation Ibn 'Ata' Allah deploys a method referred to here as soteriological semiotics. To deny creation through outward actions, supposedly for the sake of Allah, is to deny Allah's communication with creation. There is a Hadith Qudsi within which Allah states

*O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that with Me?*<sup>35</sup>

It can be seen that the proscriptions and prohibitions are set up to outwardly express what is perceived inwardly.

## ***Cause and Effect***

The domain of creation is the domain of cause and effect. For Ibn 'Ata' Allah it can be seen that the process of cause and effect has a pedagogical role as Allah deploys it to test the perspicacity

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<sup>35</sup> In Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, trans., *Forty Hadith Qudsi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997), 88.

of creation in perceiving the motion of the Divine through the contingently existent. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "causes must needs exist, which at the same time, one must be absent to them in order to witness"<sup>36</sup> and that "he who stops at these [causes and effects] is bound to meet with disillusionment."<sup>37</sup> In order to witness the creative expression of the Divine "one must be absent" from causes that seem to indicate effects resulting from creation for this, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, is disillusionment. Furthermore, "He has made the familiar chains of cause and effect, mediating forces and earthly causes to be like veils which conceal His power, and like the clouds which obscure the suns of His oneness."<sup>38</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah mentions that cause and effect are "like veils" for, like the sun veiled by clouds, the Divine Unicity prevails even though its perception is obscured. It will be seen that it is in the removal of these "veils" that constitutes an increasing awareness of *tawhid*.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, a difficulty arises regarding sustenance for the individual who, ignorant of *tawhid*, attributes to himself the ability to affect an outcome. The reason for this is that such an individual will readily assert that it is through their efforts that they gain sustenance. However, the Qur'an repetitively states, in varying formulations, "eat and drink of the sustenance provided by God" (2: 60).<sup>39</sup> For this reason, Ibn 'Ata' Allah encourages his readers to "seek your sustenance from God, whose goodness embraces all creation in grace and compassion."<sup>40</sup> With those who assert that "food satisfies my appetite," Ibn 'Ata' Allah queries "Does the food itself satisfy" or is it "that it is Allah who satisfies your appetite through the food."<sup>41</sup> It is important to reiterate that Ibn 'Ata' Allah does not deny the ontological existence of creation. However, in doing so, he recognises that Allah engages the ontologically contingent entities by means of other creations in a manner that does not impinge on their potential for understanding the primacy of Allah. On this Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "when the forgetful man (*al-ghafil*) gets up in the morning, he reflects on what he is going to do, whereas the intelligent man (*al-'aql*) sees

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<sup>36</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>39</sup> Similar statements can be found at 2: 172, 2: 212, 2: 254, 3: 27, 3: 37, 3: 169, 4: 39, 5: 88, 5: 114, 6: 142, 6: 151, 7: 50, 1: 160, 8: 3, 10: 31, and 10: 59 among others.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> In Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine*, 371.

what God is doing with him.”<sup>42</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is pushing for “contentment with God alone,”<sup>43</sup> while reassuring the reader that Allah’s mercy is unrestricted and inclusive. This contentment is expressed as trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) and nonattachment to the world.

Allah’s inclusive mercy evokes another problem, similar to the problem of *rizq*. Like *rizq*, it may be objected that impediments and their solution spring from the selfsame source. It is possible to see that this is both true and untrue at the same time. From the perspective of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics of *tawhid* it is true, for if either were independent of each other then this would equate to two existents, which is incongruent with *tawhid*. From the perspective of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s ontology, this problem arises as a result of fixating on creation, which veils Allah’s actions (*sifat*) and names (*asma*). Relief comes, not from the veils, but through that which is veiled. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s solution is to “appeal to no one but Him to relieve you of a pressing need that He Himself has brought upon you.”<sup>44</sup> In apprehending this, an aspect of this which is veiled is revealed,<sup>45</sup> as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah recognises, “deprivation (*al-man’*) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding God in it.”<sup>46</sup> The Qur’an states that for “everyone who is conscious of God” (65: 2) Allah “provides for him in a manner beyond all expectation” (65: 3). Thus, for those who understand the reasons Allah brings a pressing need upon them, i.e. those who understand “what God is doing with him,”<sup>47</sup> trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) is increased. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics can be seen to be shifting the focus away from the ontological domain and the creation (*khalq*) as an end-in-itself so that the reality (*al-Haqq*) can be affirmed.

While it appears that deprivation and trial arises through the ontological domain, such events arise through Allah’s providing for the needs of creation (*khalq*) irrespective of a) the latter’s awareness of this process or b) whether or not the latter believes that any particular event is necessary. Implicit within this view is that the ultimate need is the unwavering awareness of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 162.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note the dual nature of “reveal” in that it can be understood as both to uncover as well as to re-cover.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Allah, this being Ibn 'Ata' Allah's overarching soteriological concern. While, in a sense, impediments and their solution have their roots in the selfsame source, it appears that the problem arises as a result of the conflation of the metaphysical and ontological domains as they are here defined. Thus, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics repeatedly attempts to demarcate the signs that Allah deploys through the ontological domain to assert His metaphysical Unicity.

### ***Obedience (ta'a)***

Obedience (*ta'a*) to Divine decree is another means for testing the commitment to the metaphysics of *tawhid*. Obedience includes "'commissions' and 'omissions', in other words, things which the Truth requires you to do, and things which He requires you to refrain from doing."<sup>48</sup> However, whilst adhering to or abstaining from certain actions is set out by Divine decree, Ibn 'Ata' Allah, in maintaining the metaphysics of *tawhid*, illustrates that such actions are not good-in-themselves. These actions are beneficial solely because they are the most effective means for removing the veils that efface the awareness and affirmation of *tawhid*. These commissions and omissions are effective in as far as an individual, through them, is effaced before Allah. Disposing of one's egocentric behaviour is necessary for soteriological development as "every action requires the concentration of one's whole being on God."<sup>49</sup> Again, to maintain a disposition that is metaphysically consistent with *tawhid*, it is not enough to perform such acts out of a preference against the alternative. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that "the servant is moved by a desire to perform such acts [religious obligations] because God, may He be praised, has appointed their number, their times, and their causes."<sup>50</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah's point is that such actions may be performed without an individual concentrating their "whole being on God" and as a result their performance has no corresponding soteriological value. For an individual's ontological prolongation to be consistent with the metaphysics of *tawhid* requires a shift from a self-centred consciousness to a God-centred consciousness, which involves a total deference to Allah.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 34. Nor is it soteriologically beneficial to do them because of the pleasure that can be found there in, as was previously mentioned.



The pursuit of obedience to the Divine results in another, seemingly paradoxical relationship, though this time with regard to creation's contingency. Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that "the servant's fulfilment of these obligations has nothing to do with his choice for himself, and everything to do with God's choice for him."<sup>51</sup> It is for this reason that it should be sufficient recompense "for obedience that He has judged you worthy of obedience,"<sup>52</sup> indicating that obedience to the proscribed commissions and omissions come as a result of Allah's favour of the individual and not as a result of the latter's choice. However, that the fulfilment of obligations depends on Allah's choice for this individual highlights the fact that the worth any action is in the awareness of Allah that it engenders. Ibn 'Ata' Allah recognises this in stating that "a disobedience that bequeaths humiliation and extreme need is better than an obedience that bequeaths self-infatuation and pride."<sup>53</sup> For this reason "sometimes He opens the door of obedience for you but not the door of acceptance; or sometimes He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause of arriving at Him."<sup>54</sup> Thus, while it is necessary to adhere to the proscriptions and prohibitions, the worth of an action is in the degree that it engenders deference to Allah for this in turn develops trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) and nonattachment to the world.

Obedience to Allah, as conceived by Ibn 'Ata' Allah, is the point from which freedom can be obtained. Whilst in a narrow sense, obedience to the Divine decree is the condition for entering paradise, freedom from damnation is not the kind of freedom alluded to, here. Furthermore, it must be recognised that, due to the nature of existence, contingently existent beings cannot be ontologically free, for this contradicts *tawhid*. However, this does not preclude freedom altogether. The kind of freedom that Ibn 'Ata' Allah is implicitly advocating is epistemological freedom. Ibn 'Ata' Allah, through his works, is aiming to show the point where the individual "will perceive the wisdom in his Lord's choice."<sup>55</sup> This follows the Qur'anic injunction that "when thou hast decided upon a course of action, place thy trust in God" (3: 159), such that "for everyone who places his trust in God He [alone] is enough" (65: 3). This culminates in trusting Allah and deferring to Allah in all actions. While the perception of choice posits multiple possibilities, *tawhid* accepts only one reality, for "not a breath (*nafas*) do you expire

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 169.

but a decree of Destiny has made it go forth.”<sup>56</sup> In knowing this, and, more importantly, embodying it, the individual is free to pursue the necessary course of action without being dogged by doubt, regret, or self-reliance. The implications and importance of this is highlighted in the following chapters.

### ***Poverty (faqr) and the Poor (faqir)***

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, like other Sufis, maintains that a consequence of *tawhid* is the total dependency of creation on their Creator. Creation has nothing that Allah needs,<sup>57</sup> while Allah has everything that creation needs, as the Qur’an states “it is you, who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is self-sufficient” (35: 15). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah notes that “the friend of God has gone from disposing of his own affairs to relying upon God’s disposal thereof ... by his sincere reliance on God.”<sup>58</sup> The element of trust (*tawakkul*) implicit within this act, while not intrinsic to Allah’s disposing of the affairs of creation, is essential for soteriological development. While this is further discussed in the following chapter, it should be acknowledged that this seemingly simple act incorporates a number of soteriologically important elements. Firstly, acknowledging one’s complete dependence on Allah and one’s own ontological poverty entails an act of humility. Secondly, it removes feelings of or for self-subsistence and thus all claims to godhood. Thirdly, the trust it engenders allows the individual to focus on what is required of them, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah stated “striving for what has already been guaranteed to you, and your remissness in what is demanded of you, are signs of the blurring of your intellect.”<sup>59</sup>

Soteriological development depends on understanding the ontologically contingent position of creatures in relation to Allah. This culminates in embodying this position and affirming it through action. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah advises that one must “cling to the attributes of His Lordship and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 27.

<sup>57</sup> This is meant in an absolute sense without detracting from particular applications, such as Allah, as Lord (*rubb*), is said to need creation so that He has something to be lord over or as the All Merciful (*al-rahman*) for this requires a recipient of this mercy.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 24.

realize the attributes of your servanthood.”<sup>60</sup> He further reminds his readers that “if you want gifts to come your way, then perfect the spiritual poverty (*al-faqr*) you have,” quoting the Qur’anic passage that “alms are only for the poor” (9: 60).<sup>61</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is here making an esoteric allusion to the Islamic alms (*zakat*) that corresponds to their exoteric interpretation. Just as material alms are a gift from those without need to those in need, Allah, who is ultimately without need, bestows gifts to those who recognise their ontological poverty and complete dependency on Allah. This sort of poverty is here qualified as ontological for, in relation to Allah, creation is likewise epistemologically poor. Epistemic poverty, within the domain of cause and effect, would include being veiled to creation’s intrinsic ontological poverty. Insight into and recognition of one’s inherent ontological poverty would be an example of the kind of alms mentioned by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah.

The ability to embrace, and thus embody, ontological poverty, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, requires contentment with this ontological position. In the Qur’an it is stated that animals sacrificed to Allah are to be utilised to “feed the poor who is contented with his lot” (22: 36). In enumerating the qualities of those who embrace poverty (*faqir*), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “the *faqir* is the one who casts off secondary causes and turns away from hindrances” and has “no *qibla* [direction] nor goal except Allah.”<sup>62</sup> In doing this “the one who embraces poverty refuses everything that is other than God” so that they may realise “the reality of *la ilaha ill’Allah Muhammadun Rasulu’llah*.”<sup>63</sup> This shows that for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah there is an intimate connection between embracing ontological poverty and affirming the metaphysic of *tawhid*.

Acknowledging one’s ontological poverty requires embodying certain characteristics. However, before discussing these character traits, it is important to note that embodying and affirming the inherent ontological poverty of contingent beings does not equate with being destitute. Whilst periods of destitution, or appearing destitute, may be utilised in affirming one’s ontological poverty, it is not the goal. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah highlights this point with the story of a student of a poor fisherman going to visit his teacher’s teacher, only to find the latter living a luxurious life which bewilders the student. The events that transpire do not surprise the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 49, quoting Danner’s translation of the Qur’an.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al Tawfiq*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 7.

fisherman for he knows that, regarding his teacher, “God has purified his heart of the world, yet has placed it in his hand and given him the appearance of a worldly man” while “as for me, He has taken it out of my hand, yet I still long for it.”<sup>64</sup> The point of this story highlights the differing conceptions of *zuhd* as asceticism and nonattachment, for while the poor fisherman was utilising ascetic practices to inculcate nonattachment, his teacher embodied nonattachment and as a result could be surrounded with worldly luxuries without longing for their presence. On this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “it is not one of their conditions that they not have wealth; rather, among them are those who have wealth and those who have nothing.”<sup>65</sup> The confusion of the student resulted from his seeing asceticism as an end rather than as a means to nonattachment.<sup>66</sup>

In embodying one’s ontological poverty, the virtues that are affirmed are not affirmed for their human qualities, nor are they ends-in-themselves. The qualities necessary for the poor (*faqir*) are not virtues in the sense that they relate to the peak of human potentiality, for these qualities do not begin with humanity, allowing individuals to reach towards Allah. Rather, in accordance with *tawhid*, virtues are the result of the expression of Allah’s names (*asma*) and attributes (*sifat*). The goal of which, for the *faqir*, is to “take on the character of their master.”<sup>67</sup> In acknowledging their ontological poverty and dependency, the *faqir* is able to partake in the Divine characteristics in as far as they are able to embody and enact *tawhid*.

### ***Rizq within the Ontological Domain***

The ontological domain is the site of the problem of *rizq* for it is within this arena that provision is pursued, attained, and consumed. Due to the inherent ontological poverty of contingent beings, such beings are always in need of something beyond themselves. One reason for this is creation’s contingency, which, whether acknowledged or not, creates a compulsion to seek

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<sup>64</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 302 – 303.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 130.

<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view that asceticism is not an end-in-itself is further clarified in stating that “the Real did not require from the servants to not partake of enjoyments, but rather required them to give thanks when they enjoy them,” Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al Tawfiq*, 11.

fulfilment. Another reason for this is creation's ontological poverty, which ensures that they cannot attain fulfilment through themselves. This compulsion is liable to yield purely self-interested pursuits and, to curtail this, the Qur'an emphasises compassionate consideration of others, encouraging people to "spend on others out of what God has provided for you as sustenance" (36: 47). However, armed with an incomplete understanding of *tawhid*, the common response, goaded by self-interest, is likely to be "shall we feed anyone whom, if God had so willed, He could have fed" (36: 47). This verse illustrates how the problem of *rizq* arises from a misunderstanding of how *tawhid* is manifested ontologically. Further verses highlight the fact that the implications of *tawhid* are not always fully thought out. In a verse where polytheists are questioned the Qur'an states "if thou ask them, 'who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' – they will surely answer, 'God'" (39: 38), however, in response to a follow up question, "have you, then, ever considered what it is that you invoke instead of God" (39: 38), they have no response.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the problem of *rizq* can be seen to arise as a result of misunderstanding the relation between the ontological and metaphysical domains.

In attempting to understand the ontological domain, if this understanding is to be consistent with *tawhid*, then an intermediary cannot be placed before Allah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that one's experience "is nothing except the compassion that He sent to you and to the servants through the outward manifestations of father and mother, as a means of making you come to know of His love" for "in reality, nothing cared for you except His Lordship, and nothing nurtured you and satisfied you except His Divinity."<sup>69</sup> *Tawhid* is maintained for Allah communicates to creation through creation. As Ibn 'Ata' Allah further explains, "you have never left, nor will you ever come out of the circle of His beneficence."<sup>70</sup> Metaphysically, this is a given, for Allah encompasses all that exists, without being limited to it. The corollary of this is that it is possible to understand all experience as being augmented so that, irrespective of the individual, all creation has the greatest possibility of acknowledging their Lord. However, due to the contingency inherent within creation, as it is played out ontologically, this point is often veiled. This shows one of the benefits of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics, for, in understanding that Allah communicates to creation through creation, he is able to highlight the signs of this communication such that each individual may realise their potential for acknowledging Allah in all circumstances.

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<sup>68</sup> This topic is similarly discussed in 13: 16, 31: 25, and 35: 40.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

It might seem obvious to state that the problem of *rizq* is only a problem when provision (*rizq*) seems in short supply. This is because the perception of constrained quantities often invokes anxiety and hardship in the resulting pursuit for further provisions. It is necessary to state that *rizq* ‘seems in short supply’ because there is no abundance or lack other than what will allow an individual the greatest possibility of acknowledging Allah. The Divine command, to give or withhold provision, “is not the command of other than Him, that it should become a source of hardship for you,” for “it is the command and the decree of your Master, the very same One who supports you with His beneficence and comes to you with His benevolence.”<sup>71</sup> In this it can be seen that difficulty arises as a result of not comprehending the “source of hardship,” for in understanding that it is “the decree of your Master” transforms the situation from one of hardship into a communication between the Absolute and the contingent. Thus, both the source of the hardship and the solution to it are the same and both, when understood in this manner, are an indication of the Unicity of Allah (*tawhid*). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah succinctly summarises this sentiment as “there is nothing for him [from Him] that he could choose for himself [other than His choice].”<sup>72</sup> Anxiety over the perception of constrained quantities is an indication of a lack of trust (*tawakkul*). The solution to this is in developing trust in Allah’s choice for His creation and contentment in the knowledge that it has occurred through the choice of Allah.

In order to further clarify the reception of perceived hardships, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah likens them to bitter medicine. Those who are content with the choice of Allah “take the heat for the sake of seeking contentment, as the sick man bears the bitter medicine for the sake of recovery and health.”<sup>73</sup> The recovery that patient endurance elicits, by way of understanding and contentment with Allah’s choice, results in the realisation of the necessity of such actions in as far as they accord with *tawhid*. Thus, the metaphysics of *tawhid* enjoins contentment with the necessity of events, for “thy Sustainer creates whatever He wills; and he chooses whatever is best for them” (28: 68). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges that unpleasant events exist, though he recognises that they do not exist solely for their unpleasantness.<sup>74</sup> He writes that “afflictions

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>74</sup> This is similar to the position of al-Ghazali, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 55, who posits that evil does not have inherent existence, rather “there is no evil in existence which does not contain some good within it, and were that evil to be eliminated, the good within it would be nullified.”

extinguish and humiliate the ego and prevent it from seeking after its desires, and that with this humility is victory.”<sup>75</sup> With regard to the problem of *rizq*, it is now possible to see that any perceived lack of provision is merely a perception, and not a real lack, for it is an aspect of the bitter medicine. However, rather than accepting the medicine for what it is, more often than not it is avoided, and the treatment prolonged.

### ***The Perception of Hardships***

According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah the perception of hardships is at the centre of human earthly existence.<sup>76</sup> For this reason it is crucial to gain a correct understanding of this issue, without which no solution can be pursued. He writes that “error and fault are a fundamental part of your existence, nay, even the source (*‘ain*) of your existence.”<sup>77</sup> The fault being referred to is the self’s perceived independence. Independence is only perceived, for any real independence would contradict *tawhid*. For this reason it is the selves “which are the places of agitation and which contend with Allah,”<sup>78</sup> meaning that they are agitated due to their inherent ontological poverty and contend with Allah over causative effectiveness. On this Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “he who wishes that at a given moment there appear other than what God has manifested in it, has not left ignorance behind at all.”<sup>79</sup> This agitation is an indication of distrust towards Allah, for “one of the signs of relying on one’s own deeds is the loss of hope when a downfall occurs.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, it becomes apparent that the solution to the problem of *rizq*, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, is in the acquisition and application of a soteriological semiotics that affirms *tawhid*.

Yet, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is quick to point out that a perceived downfall is a means to realising the nature of the relationship between the Absolute and the contingent. He reminds his readers

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<sup>75</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 10.

<sup>76</sup> The distinction between “earthly existence” and the entire ontological domain is necessary for the latter includes paradise (*Janna*) despite it being defined by its lack of hardship and trials for its inhabitants.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>79</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 23.

that “when He gives, He shows you His kindness (*birr*); when He deprives, He shows you His power (*qahr*),” however, and above all, “in all that, He is making Himself known to you and coming to you with His gentleness.”<sup>81</sup> An example of this is the fall of Adam, of which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “it was a fall in form, but an ascent in meaning.”<sup>82</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah considers it an ascent for a) “He could make Himself known to them through forbearance, covering-up of deeds, forgiveness, relenting, and choosing” as well as b) making possible two stances towards Allah, namely “returning to Him repentant, and guidance from Him.”<sup>83</sup> While, from a contingent perspective, the fall is seen as the source of all hardship and suffering, it is, from this perspective, the event that gave all the children of Adam the potential to realise their intrinsic relationship with Allah. Regarding this, he stated that “He only made affliction come at the hands of people so that you not repose in them” so that by using creation to drive creatures from depending on creation Allah ensured that “nothing would drive you from Him.”<sup>84</sup> This highlights one aspect of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s assertion that “sometimes He opens the door of obedience for you but not the door of acceptance; or sometimes He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause of arriving at Him.”<sup>85</sup> The so called sin, and subsequent fall, was the means through which each human gained the potential of “arriving at Him.”

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah holds that the reality of *rizq* is that it proceeds indefinitely from Allah. He writes that “for Allah created all beings, and bestowed His grace upon them, first, through giving them existence, and second, through uninterrupted sustenance.”<sup>86</sup> The importance of this passage, with regard to the problem of *rizq*, is twofold. Firstly, it shows that, irrespective of one’s awareness of Allah, provision for creation is uninterrupted, thus the problem of *rizq* is not how to get more but how to a) realise the necessity of the provision bestowed and b) find satisfaction in that provision. Secondly, it shows that, even though existence implies an inherent error/friction, it is also a grace for it contains the solution to that apparent error/friction. It is necessary to differentiate an implied or apparent error from a real error, for

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>82</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 30. This shows the distinction between form and meaning that only becomes apparent through the acquisition of a soteriological semiotics.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>84</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 56.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>86</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 65.



the latter would mean that there is a contradiction in *tawhid*, which is not possible according to an Islamic paradigm, while the former does not penetrate beyond mere appearances. This relates to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's view that "the intellect is the greatest bounty Allah has granted His slaves,"<sup>87</sup> for the intellect has the potential to pierce the outward forms in order to apprehend their metaphysical foundation, which is perceived through the application of a soteriological semiotics.

It is possible to see why the ontological domain is the site of the problem of *rizq*. The problem of *rizq* is the problem of contingency and, thus, occupies the domain within which contingency abounds. While *rizq* is not a problem relating to reality as such, it is intimately bound up with the contingently existent's relationship with, and apprehension of, reality as such. For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, apprehending the true relationship between the Absolute and the contingent cuts to the core of our being and for this reason imposes the obligation of finding and applying the solution to this issue. The solution to the problem of *rizq* is not extraneous to the ontological domain for a) it is located within this domain and b) the ontological domain, being underpinned by *tawhid*, does not contain anything that acts independently from this inherent unity. For these reasons, the solution to problem of *rizq*, while located within the epistemic domain, is to be found in the correct understanding of, and approach to, the ontological domain, which, in turn, is dependent on the metaphysic of *tawhid*.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 65.

## Chapter 6 – Epistemology

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as has been seen, due to the inherent contingency of creation, the ontological domain is the site of the problem of *rizq*. Within the domain of epistemology there is a shift of focus from creation, as it is within the ontological domain, to a focus on the individual’s comprehension of creation. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah the goal for the individual is to comprehend the nature of their contingency and, as a result, the relationship between the metaphysical and ontological domains. Statements such as “My God, how near You are to me, and how far I am to You”<sup>1</sup> indicate the gap between the metaphysical reality and the epistemic state of the individual. Within the epistemological domain an understanding of the relationship between the two aspects of the *kalimah*, namely there is no god but Allah (*la ilaha illa’llah*) and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (*Muhammad rasul Allah*), is developed. It will be shown that in understanding this, the conflation of domains that gives rise to the problem of *rizq* is corrected and a solution can be found.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not explicitly develop an epistemology, although his works indicate that he advances a specific epistemic model. This epistemic model, like the rest of his work, is founded on *tawhid* such that it could be said that the goal of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology is to comprehend, and thus affirm, *tawhid* as it is manifest in creation. He states that “every knower – whatever his kind might be, and whether he knows it or not – understands Him and affirms Oneness of Him, as God Most High has said, ‘And unto God falleth prostrate whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly ...’”<sup>2</sup> The unwilling prostration is understood to result from creations inherent contingency and its unavoidable reliance on Allah, though it is committed in ignorance. Conversely, to prostrate willingly requires knowledge of Allah and creation’s relation to Allah. This he calls beneficial knowledge, which “is that through which aid is sought in obedience to Allah,” it “overpowers and subdues caprice,”<sup>3</sup> and “uncovers the veil over the heart.”<sup>4</sup> Beneficial knowledge also includes the “knowledge of Allah and the knowledge of His commandments”<sup>5</sup> and is seen to impact on the understanding of, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 170 – 71. Quoting (13: 15).

<sup>3</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 158.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 159.

approach to, the ontological domain in that “by virtue of that experiential knowledge ... the witnessing of creatures as active independent agents falls from their hearts.”<sup>6</sup> The chief tool used to aid in the acquisition of beneficial knowledge and affirm *tawhid* is his soteriological semiotics which, as seen, decodes the signs within creation that Allah uses to communicate with creation. As a result, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology cannot be considered strictly noetic.

## ***The Importance of Self-Knowledge***

It is evident within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works that self-knowledge is important in understanding the relationship between the Absolute and the individual. He cites the well known saying “whoever knows himself knows his Lord” for this “indicates that self-knowledge leads to the knowledge of God.”<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah quotes Abu’l Abbas as stating that this can be interpreted in two ways, either a) “if someone knows himself in his lowliness, helplessness and poverty, he will come to know God in His glorious might, power and self-sufficiency” or b) this saying means that “if someone knows himself, this is evidence that he had already known God before this.”<sup>8</sup> Both interpretations indicate that the epistemic state of an individual is intimately connected with their knowledge of their ontological reality and that self-knowledge is a crucial aspect of that. Regarding the importance of self-knowledge, it has been suggested within Sufism that “self-knowledge is not only the condition but also the goal of the mystical quest.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is necessary to explore the centrality of self-knowledge in correctly apprehending the contingency of creation and its accord with *tawhid*.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 54. There is some disagreement between scholars and Sufis as to the exact source of this well known saying, often quoted amongst Sufi circles. Many Sufis, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah amongst them, believe that the saying “whoever knows himself knows his Lord” to be Hadith, though other scholars trace it to Yahya Ibn Mu’adh al-Razi, including Roberts, *Subtle Blessings*, 395n79, while Armin Eschraghi, “‘I was a Hiddenn Treasure’. Some Notes on a Commentary Ascribed to Mulla Sadra Shirazi: *Shar Hadith: ‘Kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan...’*,” in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anna Akasoy and Wim Raven (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 92 states that “its earliest known occurrence seems to be in ‘Abdallah Ansari’s (d. 1089) *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Louis Michon, “The Spiritual Practices of Sufism,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 285.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah repeatedly indicates that gaining self-knowledge is connected to realising one's potentiality. He states that "whenever you admit your ignorance and fall back on your root, the recognition of your self will appear to you"<sup>10</sup> for in the knowledge of their inherent ontological poverty, the individual ceases to rely upon what they attribute to be their own capacities and, in turning away from these, Ibn 'Ata' Allah would have the individual turn to the source of all potentiality, namely Allah. This is further emphasised in stating that "when you are convinced about your attributes and you have seen the faults of your *nafs* [ego] – although they are concealed – then you will obtain the manifestation of the attributes of your Master."<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the reception, and embodiment, of the Master's qualities is a passive act by the recipient. The receptivity of the individual is dependent on their realisation of their total ontological poverty and the reception of virtues is evidence of, or witness to, their acceptance and embodiment of this ontological poverty.

There is a simple manner of approaching self-knowledge. According to Ibn 'Ata' Allah, there are four possible epistemic states that an individual can find their self in. Ibn 'Ata' Allah quotes Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi as stating,

*There are four times in which the servant will find himself, of which there is no fifth: blessing, affliction, obedience, and disobedience. In each of these times, there is an aspect of servanthood which the Truth requires of you by virtue of His lordship. If it is a time of obedience, your path is to bear witness to God's grace, since it is He who has guided you into this obedience and has made it possible for you. If it is a time of disobedience, your path is to seek God's forgiveness and repent. If it is a time of blessing, your path is to give thanks, which means for your heart to rejoice in God. If it is a time of affliction, your path is to be content with God's decree and to endure patiently.<sup>12</sup>*

These four epistemic states delimit the possible states of the contingently existent with regard to Allah. It is important to note that these four states are not necessarily connected to the individual's soteriological development, in as far as the transition through them does not necessitate progress nor does their occurrence indicate any particular development within the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 251.

individual. Rather these can be considered as four doors at the centre of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics which demarcate the possible conditions confronting the individual and their four keys, for once a condition has been correctly diagnosed the appropriate key can be utilised, thus opening the way to pass onto another epistemic state. The importance of self-knowledge for the individual’s soteriological development is here evident in that it allows for a) a correct diagnosis and b) the knowledge of which key to utilise.

### ***Repentance (tawba) and Disobedience***

Repentance is connected to the seeming contradiction between servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) and self-direction (*tadbir*). Repentance occupies an important place within Islamic, and specifically Sufi, soteriology. As the previous quote from Abu’l Abbas al-Mursi indicates, repentance (*tawba*) is a condition for moving from a state of disobedience. However, if, ontologically, servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) is an inherent aspect of creation, due to the metaphysics of *tawhid*, how can creation be accused of disobedience? While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not tackle this question directly, there is sufficient evidence in his works to propose an answer.

From Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works it becomes apparent that disobedience does not occur ontologically, but epistemologically. He writes that “sometimes He opens the door of obedience for you but not the door of acceptance; or sometimes He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause of arriving at Him”<sup>13</sup> indicating that, if understood and responded to correctly, acts of disobedience have the potential to alter the apprehension of Allah. This makes disobedience an epistemologically useful pedagogical tool through which greater obedience is possible. This is further confirmed by a Hadith which states that “had you not committed sins, Allah would have brought into existence a creation that would have committed sin (and Allah) would have forgiven them.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, there can be seen to be an intrinsic relationship between disobedience and repentance. It is through disobedience that repentance becomes both possible and necessary. Disobedience is often the result of absentmindedness, an act which is corrected through consciously remembering Allah in order to repent, for it is only those who have the ability to forget that remembrance (*dhikr*) is possible. This is one reason Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2000), # 6620. This sentiment is also reported in Sahih Muslim Hadiths # 6621 and 6622 as well.

states that disobedience or sin can be “a cause of arriving at Him” for sincerity in repentance can be greater than it is in an act of obedience, hence obedience does not always lead to the “door of acceptance.”

### ***Patient Endurance (sabr) and Contentment (rida)***

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s call for patient endurance (*sabr*) arises due to what he sees as a) a lack of self-knowledge and b) a lack of understanding Allah’s methods. He writes that he was informed by Abu’l Abbas that “‘patient endurance’ (*sabr*) is derived from the word *asbar*, which refers to the target used by archers” such that “the person with patient endurance is one who sets himself up as a target for the arrows of divine decree”<sup>15</sup> and that “if, then, one is unmoved by them [the arrows of divine decree], he or she is said to have patient endurance.”<sup>16</sup> The patient endurance of and contentment with divine decree is connected with creation’s ignorance in as far as “He knows best that in which your true well-being lies.”<sup>17</sup> It is the ontological poverty inherent in creation that is emphasised through hardship and a failure to acknowledge that this is a veil which conceals *tawhid*. In acknowledging that “it is God who delivers us from those impediments which threaten to keep us from Him,”<sup>18</sup> contingent creation endures the “arrows of divine decree” as a means to witness Allah as the sole Creator and affirm *tawhid*. It is for this reason that “the Real desired to manifest the essential and desperate need of the animal towards nourishment and food,”<sup>19</sup> for instilling this fundamental requirement makes it possible for creation to become aware of their lack of self-sufficiency. Furthermore, in being content with the “arrows of divine decree” the individual elicits their trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) for, rather than attempting to avoid hardship, they adhere to Allah’s choice for them.

According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah *sabr* can be divided into three basic categories. These are: “(1) perseverance in the performance of duties, (2) self-control in the face of what is forbidden, and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 178.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 94.

(3) steadfastness and equanimity in affliction.”<sup>20</sup> These three categories all relate to instilling and maintaining an awareness of creation’s lack of self-sufficiency. In spelling out these categories, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah draws in the etymology of *sabr*, indicating that an individual may feel targeted when called upon to maintain composure and control when facing affliction. Regarding the third category of patient endurance, through the experience of hardships it is necessary to remember the verse “Allah does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear” (2: 286). Through his understanding of this verse, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is telling his reader that as Allah has promised humanity the strength to bear all trials that are presented to them, they should trust in Allah to uphold this promise by having patience with their circumstances.

The three categories of *sabr*, while encompassing the boundaries of what it is to have patience, do not reach the limits of patient endurance. Without diminishing their status regarding either the difficulty of attaining them or the exaltedness of those who have achieved all three of these categories of *sabr*, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that they are to be considered ‘basic’ only in comparison with “the patient endurance exhibited by the greatest of God’s saints.”<sup>21</sup> The basic categories of *sabr* involve patiently enduring the effects of the actions that each individual commits, whereas the *sabr* of “the greatest of God’s saints” involves enduring the afflictions placed upon them through others, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah recognises “God has afflicted those who belong to this community through other people in order that, by virtue of their patient endurance of people’s persecution, He might elevate their status.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, hardships are not meant to be viewed as merely punishment for they are the catalyst through which soteriological development occurs. This is indicated in the Hadith that states that “no calamity befalls a Muslim but that Allah expiates some of his sins because of it, even though it were [sic] the prick he receives from a thorn.”<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that this bitter medicine is necessary.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 179. This threefold division of the kinds of patience (*sabr*) is also for in Abu’l-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Sufi Book of Spiritual Ascent*, trans. Rabia Harris (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1997), 135, where it states that “patience with the things for which he is responsible for is itself in two parts: patience in what God Most High has commanded him to do and patience in what He has forbidden him from doing,” corresponding to the first two basic categories respectively, and “as for patience in what the servant has not earned, it consists of enduring whatever hardship attaches itself to him by the decree of God,” corresponding to the third category of patience.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 179.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>23</sup> al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, # 5640. Similar sentiments are stated in Hadiths # 5641, 5642, and 5647.

Furthermore, such afflictions are far from negative in that “it should be also borne in mind that if everyone believed in God’s friends, they would miss the opportunity to endure patiently the disbelief of those who do not believe in them.”<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah provides a list of examples of the things indicating the *sabr* “exhibited by the greatest of God’s saints,” though without dwelling on them, with regard to the levels of *sabr*, it should be noted that their difference is in degree not in kind. While the number of arrows shot by Divine decree differs, the qualities that both levels of patient endurance (*sabr*) engender are the same, though differing in intensity.

Similar to, and closely connected with, patient endurance (*sabr*) is contentment (*rida*). Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah shows this connection in stating that “if it is a time of affliction, your path is to be content with God’s decree and to endure patiently.”<sup>25</sup> Both *sabr* and *rida* are necessary responses to affliction. Regarding the etymology of *rida*, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “contentment (*rida*) is to break (*radd*) oneself of one’s passions.”<sup>26</sup> “One’s passions” often include the desire to be free of hardships, which, as seen, would preclude the soteriological development that potentially results from such hardships, thus prolonging the bitter medicine. “One’s passions” also include the desires one has for oneself even though the Qur’an states “it may well be that you hate a thing the while it is good for you, and it may well be that you love a thing the while it is bad for you: and God knows, whereas you do not know” (2: 216). For these reasons it is necessary to show contentment (*rida*), patience (*sabr*), and trust (*tawakkul*) so that soteriological development can occur.

## ***The Goal of Knowledge***

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah the acquisition of knowledge is not an end in itself. The value of knowledge is predominantly soteriological in that its acquisition enhances the contingently existence’s potentiality to act in accordance with the Absolute. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “the evidence of that knowledge which God seeks is reverent fear, while the evidence of the presence of reverent fear is obedience to God’s commands.”<sup>27</sup> This is a clear example illustrating that “the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 298.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 22.



purpose of knowledge is action.”<sup>28</sup> However, as the preceding quote shows, not just any action is acceptable, rather it is action for the sake of Allah. It is apparent that patient endurance (*sabr*) and contentment (*rida*) implies a certain set of directives. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “it is impossible that one would be content with Allah as Lord but not with Islam as a religion, or be pleased with Islam as a religion but not with Muhammad as a prophet.”<sup>29</sup> As a result it is clear that acknowledging the oneness of Allah results in a set of directives that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah views as immutable. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is uncompromising on this point, writing that “someone who acquires knowledge in order to gain this world and to achieve status therein may be likened to someone who picks up excrement with a sapphire spoon.”<sup>30</sup> While this may seem stern, given his project, it is understandable. The kind of knowledge that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is encouraging his readers to pursue is that which gives insight into the principle of manifestation. Thus, knowledge, and its resulting action, cannot be accepted as an end in itself for, being done for the sake of that which is other than Allah would contradict *tawhid*.<sup>31</sup>

The kind of knowledge that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is pursuing, and encouraging others to pursue, is that which allows the individual to acknowledge the connection between Allah and His creation. The Unicity of Allah, being the source of existence, is the ultimate end of any pursuit for “true understanding returns you to Allah.”<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah believes that the reason for this is that “understanding from Allah unveils to you the secret of servanthood in you.”<sup>33</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*)<sup>34</sup> is affirmed through true understanding because it enacts the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> While this view affirms that “it is impossible to pursue wisdom without at the same time pursuing God,” Leaman, *An Introduction*, 191, it does not follow that this “provides at one level a role for God in a world which has no role for him at another level,” *ibid.*, 192. This is the view that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is trying to eradicate for it shows forgetfulness or an attempt to cover Allah at whichever level supposedly has “no role for Him.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 – 6.

<sup>34</sup> For clarity a comment on this term is necessary. The idea of being a servant has been sullied over the past few centuries and because of this may justifiably appear irksome to modern sensibilities. A servant cannot be continually mistreated, the fruits of which are evinced through the numerous slave revolts in colonised countries. Rather, if it is understood in the form used here, as within many Islamic texts, it gives a clue to solving the problem of *rizq*. A true servant can serve their master without concern for materialistic gain because they are safe in the

ontological poverty inherent within the individual and reconnects them with the Absolute in as far as they confirm the Unicity of Allah. For this reason, it is understandable that “amongst the signs of success at the end is turning to God at the beginning”<sup>35</sup> because turning to Allah means embodying one’s servanthood and, being a sound beginning, ensures success at the end. Servanthood “takes place through obedience to God’s commands and surrender to His decrees,”<sup>36</sup> and, most simply stated, the meaning of this is that “He [Allah] requires His servants to affirm His singularity.”<sup>37</sup> In acknowledging the contingent’s connection with the Creator, the individual is directed towards understanding, what is for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, an intrinsic aspect of their being, namely their inherent contingency. Considered an inherent aspect of creation, the awareness of contingency is increased through self-knowledge because as each individual increases their understanding of what they are, they also increase their understanding of how they are. When the metaphysics of *tawhid* underpins an individual’s epistemological outlook, that individual realises that they are for Allah by Allah and that, being a creation, their contingency is integral to their being. In understanding the simplest expression of “His singularity,” as the awareness of it deepens, it may be enacted more thoroughly through thought, speech, and deed for “the purpose of knowledge is action.” This process culminates in the unification of the individual in their inward and outward movements, allowing them to draw closer to embodying the metaphysical Unity of *tawhid*.

Within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works, knowledge of servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) can be seen to involve an understanding of its ontological foundations. He states that “you have not loved anything without being its slave, but He does not want you to be someone else’s slave.”<sup>38</sup> Loving something, in Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view, involves turning to face that which is loved to the exclusion of others such that there is a degree of enslavement to it. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah in stating that “He does not want you to be someone else’s slave” recognises that becoming a slave to contingent things involves a perpetuating cycle moving from one contingent thing to another, like the

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knowledge that a true master will unconditionally meet all such needs. While mortal masters may not always live up to this ideal, the point is that in connecting oneself with the Master of all existence one’s needs are met to the degree that the individual embodies their inherent slavehood. This is what is meant by the term *‘ubudiyyah*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 379.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 53.

“donkey at the mill.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, facing that which is loved is important for, if seen in conjunction with the Qur’anic verse “wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance” (2: 115), means that being a slave to Allah is ontologically unavoidable, though the degree to which this is understood depends on the epistemological awareness of the individual.

While an active pursuit of servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) deepens the awareness of *tawhid*, it in no way denies the realness of contingent change. Rather, it is the orientation towards creations inherent contingency that appears to change. From Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s discussion of *tawhid* it can be seen that there is no instance where any creation does not embody it, though their awareness of such embodiment may be lacking. It is through a deeper awareness of their ontological state, through self-knowledge, that the individual comes to realise their total embodiment of *tawhid*. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics utilises a selection of symbolic markers whose key function is to help induce self-awareness within the individual. As a result, it cannot be said that the world changes through soteriological development, rather it can be seen that there are concrete changes in the paradigm of selfhood that change the individual’s orientation with regard to their inherent contingency. A prime aspect of this change in orientation towards contingency is the move away from (apparent) self-direction (*tadbir*) towards the realisation of servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*).

### ***Servanthood (‘ubudiyyah) and Self-direction (tadbir)***

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah attributes an exalted position to servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*).<sup>40</sup> He states that “the most sublime abiding station in which the servant could be established [in] is the station of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is not alone in attributing an exalted position to *‘ubudiyyah*. Other thinkers who do so include al-Tustari (d. 283/896) who states that the mark of true servanthood is the individual “gives up his own management (*tadbir*) and becomes satisfied with the management of God, Exalted is He, for him,” Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Tustari, *Tafsir al-Tustari*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 101, Abu Ali I-Daqqaq (d. c. 412/1021) who stated that “servanthood is more perfect than worship (*‘ibada*),” in Ibn ‘Ajiba, *The Book of Ascension to the Essential Truths of Sufism*, trans. Mohamed F. Aresmouk and Michael A. Fitzgerald (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 20, Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240) whose view is that the relation between the individual and Allah is a situation of “total slavehood or servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*),” in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 24, and Ibn ‘Ajiba (1224/1809) whose view is that “servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) is to maintain the comportment that is due to the Lord along with an awareness of our human weakness,” Ibn ‘Ajiba, *Book of Ascension*, 20, to mention but a few.

servitude.”<sup>41</sup> Support for this view in verses such as “Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night...” (17: 1), “and in what We bestowed from on high upon Our servant” (8: 41), and “whenever a servant of God stands up in prayer to Him” (72: 19). It is the intimacy and connection between Allah and His servant that is the focus for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, whether the servant stands to commune with, receives bestowal from, or is moved by his Master. For an individual to develop this intimate connection with Allah, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it is imperative to “understand that the spirit of servitude and its secret is to abandon self-choice (*ikhtiyar*), and not contest the Divine Decrees.”<sup>42</sup> The reason for this is that “self-choice,” discussed below, treats the individual as an independent, rather than contingent, entity, thus contradicting *tawhid*. In order to “abandon self-choice” Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah divides this task into two distinct aspects, writing “its outer is compliance with Allah, and its inner is the lack of contention with Him.”<sup>43</sup> Outer compliance, which includes proscriptions and prohibitions, involves the abandoning of self-choice in preference for deferring to the Prophetic example, whereas inner compliance, involving “the lack of contention with Him,” is abandoning self-choice in preference for Allah’s choice and contentment (*rida*) with this choice. In both cases servanthood can be seen to detach the individual from preoccupation with worldly concerns so that they are free to devote their attention to Allah.

Self-direction and self-reliance are intimately connected, and for this reason are equally contrary to *tawhid*. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah quotes Abu’l Hassan as having said “make no choice upon your own authority in anything,”<sup>44</sup> which, in light of *tawhid*, is understandable considering that taking oneself as an authority effaces the authority of Allah. Abu’l Hassan is advocating for *tawhid* in two ways. Firstly, by abrogating self-choice the individual is effaced through a denial of self-reliance and, in turn, the alternative is trust in, reliance on, and contentment with Allah. On this point Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “if you wish to enter into the presence of God ... then that will not be possible for you so long as other than God lords it over your heart, for verily, you belong to whosoever has authority over you.”<sup>45</sup> Secondly, the possibility of choice presupposes multiplicity which is reaffirmed through self-choice. The Qur’an states “thy

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<sup>41</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 36.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 103 – 04.

Sustainer creates whatever He wills; and He chooses [for mankind] whatever is best for them” (28:68). Regarding this Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “if He creates and chooses what He wills, then He plans and manages as He wills,”<sup>46</sup> indicating that knowledge of creation’s ontological inefficiency, as he takes this Qur’anic passage to specify, should be sufficient to abrogate self-direction and self-reliance. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah<sup>47</sup> the verse “is, then, He who creates comparable to any [being] that cannot create” (16: 17) closes the possibility of further disputing this point.

## ***Obedience and Disobedience***

In light of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s presentation of *tawhid*, it would appear that the distinction between obedience and disobedience could fail. For, to accept Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s position appears to entail shirking from attributing actions to oneself and, thus, the associated reward or punishment, as contingent entities are not the authors of their actions. Accusations of antinomianism have been repeatedly levelled against many Sufis. Ibn Taymiyya was fond of utilising this accusation, while it has been considered to be a key aspect of the anti-Ibn Arabi polemic.<sup>48</sup> A simplified version of the argument follows the line that if everything is Allah then everything is permissible and the law (*shari’a*) is abrogated, with the accused being censured for allegedly advocating antinomian views. It is possible that this accusation rests on a conflation of the metaphysical and ontological domains.<sup>49</sup> However, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, that everything is from Allah does not free creations from their obligations. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s rejection of antinomianism is twofold.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s first reason relates to the verse “when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, ‘be’ – and it is” (2: 117). As Creator, Allah has command over cause and effect, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges “just as He creates obedience by His grace, He creates disobedience by His justice.”<sup>50</sup> Whilst all action and creation originates with Allah, acts of disobedience, being a part

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<sup>46</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>48</sup> See Knych, *Later Islamic Tradition*, *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> This is further discussed in chapter 9 below.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 55.

of cause and effect, are contingent, as he writes “not a breath (*nafas*) do you expire but a decree of Destiny has made it go forth”.<sup>51</sup> The contingency of disobedience is dependent on the contingency of creation and are therefore attributable to particular individuals. However, these actions cannot be considered inherently bad because both good and bad issue from the selfsame source, though this leads to the second point. This position relates to the abandonment of self-direction, discussed above. While it could be advanced that the individual is not responsible for their actions as all action originates with Allah, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to place responsibility on the individual in their response to the circumstances in which they are to be found. He states “do not look forward to being free of alterities (*al-aghyar*), for that is what cuts you off from vigilant attention (*al-muraqaba*) to Him in that very state He has assigned to you.”<sup>52</sup> Desiring to be “free of alterities” indicates a lack of trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) in that the individual does not trust Allah’s reasons for placing them “in that very state He has assigned to you.” According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it is possible to diagnose this for “one of the signs of relying on one’s own deeds is the loss of hope when a downfall occurs.”<sup>53</sup>

Following on from the first point, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s second reason for rejecting antinomianism involves the existence of evil. In this he holds a position akin to al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali states that Allah “intended good for the good itself, yet intended evil not for itself but because there is some good within it” such that “good is accomplished essentially but evil is accomplished accidentally.”<sup>54</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to follow this view for he writes that the attribution of evil to an action or object is a “secondary, or accidental, attribution,” indicating that he too believes that there is no inherent evil. This connects to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view of patient endurance (*sabr*) in that afflictions cannot be considered inherently bad because such afflictions are the means through which “He might elevate their status.”<sup>55</sup> The same position is applied to disobedience in that, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, any action “is not in itself essentially bad, but only because of its connection to a prohibition.”<sup>56</sup> Implicit in this position is its relation with *tawhid*, which, once it is made explicit, makes it untenable to accuse Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> al-Ghazali, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 296.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 56.

antinomianism. Any and all prohibitions are connected with the prime prohibition of submitting to anything other than Allah, a corner stone of an Islamic paradigm and key to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's metaphysics of *tawhid* for "the Real made it clear that He did not create the slaves for themselves, but rather created them so that they might worship Him and declare His Oneness."<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's statement "that they might worship Him" includes the possibility of not worshipping Allah. This possibility is further reinforced by the statement that "disobedience is an ugly action from the servant only because it is in opposition to the Divine Command."<sup>58</sup> However, this seems impossible for metaphysically *tawhid* makes it impossible that anything should oppose Allah, for if it did then that would imply a god besides Allah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah affirms this in stating that "whosoever reflects deeply will find that all creatures affirm the Oneness of God Most High in accordance with the subtleness of their 'breaths'."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, given that "He did not create him except to obey Him and serve Him,"<sup>60</sup> it becomes apparent that ontologically the possibility of opposing Allah is again impossible. However, a problem remains as to why Ibn 'Ata' Allah would imply what has so far been shown to be apparently incongruent with his metaphysics and ontology. It could be that the use of this expression has a pedagogical function. It is conceivable that this phrase is directed towards novices who may be overwhelmed by the implications of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discourse. Support for the view that this phrase has a pedagogic function can be drawn from many of his works, most of which explicitly state that they were composed for pedagogic reasons. The *Miftah al-Falah*, amongst other reasons, resulted from a prompt by "a pious brother ... to compose a book wherein I have assembled those things that would facilitate understanding the remembrance of God,"<sup>61</sup> while the *Unwan al-Tawfiq* repeatedly enjoins "O brother! Know...," "O full brother,"<sup>62</sup> "O wayfarer,"<sup>63</sup> and concludes with "this inscription is for whoever longs for the meaning of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 110.

<sup>60</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 106.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 13.

these verses,”<sup>64</sup> indicating that both texts were composed for pedagogic purposes. Even each chapter in the *Kitab al-Hikam* begins with “he said”<sup>65</sup> indicating that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was conveying his knowledge to others. In this case, the inclusion of the possibility of disobedience acts as a pressure valve for those students who perhaps cannot grasp the implications of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works.

While reading the inclusion of the possibility of disobedience as a pedagogical tool may go some way to explain this issue, it is insufficient. Furthermore, if it was strictly the case then Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah would not need to add that “the one of understanding is the one who has understood the secret of existence and acts accordingly,”<sup>66</sup> as this puts beyond doubt the existence of individuals who do not have such knowledge and thus do not act accordingly. It seems that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah roots disobedience to the epistemological domain. *Tawhid* ensures that creation cannot but “obey Him and serve Him” and thus everything affirms *tawhid* through every action. Though, due to creation’s contingency, this is done unwillingly, meaning in ignorance. Whereas, Allah can be seen to have created the distinction between obedience and disobedience to distinguish between those who have the knowledge to affirm *tawhid* willingly and those who do not.

### ***Certainty (yakin)***

While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah utilises proofs (*burhan*), for him they are only a stepping stone towards certainty (*yakin*). Proofs are no guarantee of certainty for, whereas the former are completely noetic, certainty (*yakin*) arises as a result of enacting a deep seated conviction. This was touched upon in relation to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s metaphysics of *tawhid* and it is worth repeating that for him “all certainty entails faith, though not all faith entails certainty” as “the difference between them is that while faith might be attended by heedlessness, such is not the case with certainty.”<sup>67</sup> Certainty is epistemologically greater than proofs because it carries an unshakable

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 23, 26, and 29, amongst others. Reasons for the inclusion of “he said” within the text have been discussed in some of the commentary literature on the *Kitab al-Hikam*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 106.

<sup>67</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 47.



and unrefusable resolve unlike evidence or proofs. He writes that “Shaykh Abu al-Hasan (may God be pleased with him) said, ‘we view God with the perceptive powers of faith and certainty, which has freed us from the need for evidence and proof.’”<sup>68</sup> While this in no way discards evidence or proofs, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah has been seen to utilise them,<sup>69</sup> this quote contains three important points regarding Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology. Firstly, evidence and proofs are seen to be only a preliminary stage, which the individual is later free to hold or discard upon the advent of certainty (*yakin*). Secondly, the superiority of certainty (*yakin*) over proof is in the soundness of the former compared to the mere validity of the latter. Thirdly, and of particular reference to modern discussions, the denigration of faith as unfounded belief is not applicable here in that it is built on proof and develops into certainty (*yakin*).

The development of certainty (*yakin*) is it intimately connected with action, and thus is an aspect of the goal of knowledge. This can be seen from Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s discussion on the function of, and response to, miracles, where he states that “a miracle serves to unsettle doubts concerning divine grace, [and] to [bring about] experiential knowledge of God’s bounty towards the one at whose hands it was performed.”<sup>70</sup> This can be seen to illustrate a clear connection between the development of certainty and action for he sees one function of a miracle to be the unsettling of “doubts concerning divine grace.” Regarding the response to miracles he writes that “for those to whom they are manifested, they may be taken note of by spiritual seekers who are still at the start of their journey, while they may be overlooked by those who have reached the end of their spiritual treks.”<sup>71</sup> It can be seen that the point of soteriological development plagued by doubts, generally “at the start of their journey,” requires events that with strengthen the individual’s resolve, an example of which, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, is miracles. Thus “the purpose behind it [the miracle] is to enable the servant who witnessed it to see the validity of the path being followed by the saint at whose hands the miracle was performed.”<sup>72</sup> Whereas, upon attaining certainty (*yakin*), as a result of their soteriological endeavours, such individuals “are not in need of such confirmation” and thus need not take heed of miracles.<sup>73</sup> From this it is evident that the superiority of certainty (*yakin*)

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>69</sup> As seen in chapter 4.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 86 – 87.

over mere proofs is that the former, as it occurs in conjunction with action, engenders “experiential knowledge” whereas the latter does not.

While there is an intimate interconnection between certainty and action, it can be seen to change with soteriological development. As in the case of miracles, during the early stages of soteriological development certainty (*yakin*) develops as a result of particular actions. Whereas, for those who “are not in need of such confirmation” the relationship between certainty (*yakin*) and action can be seen to alternate in that certainty increases action. Thus, irrespective of an individual’s soteriological development, there is an intimate and inseparable connection between certainty and action within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology.

### ***Knowledge and Rizq***

From the above material it appears that within the epistemological domain the solution to the problem of *rizq* is dependent upon the degree of knowledge attained regarding the relationship between the metaphysical and ontological domains. In commenting on the verse “it is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance” (30: 40), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that this indicates “that creation and provision are coupled together.”<sup>74</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, armed with this knowledge it follows that “as you have agreed that Allah is the sole Creator without claiming for yourselves any part in creating, then in the same way agree to the reality that He is the sole Provider, without any share in that.”<sup>75</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this follows because in the above cited verse “He linked the two together as an argument against the slaves and to prohibit them from witnessing any provision coming from other than Him, or seeing beneficence coming from His creation.”<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, implicit within this verse is the view that “*rizq* is already taken care of, and its affair concluded,”<sup>77</sup> placing beyond doubt the degree to which creation can affect their provision.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 111.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 111.

Allah as the sole Provider involves, primarily, two points. Firstly, provision is guaranteed, as, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it is clearly stated in the Qur’an that “We do not ask thee to provide sustenance: it is We who provide sustenance for thee” (20: 132). According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this guarantee of provision comes because “it is as if He knew that the slaves might become perturbed in their worship by seeking provision, and that that disturbance would veil them from being wholly engaged in obedience.”<sup>78</sup> By shifting the focus away from how provision arrives and onto developing the knowledge that it will arrive, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is implicitly drawing a connection between the knowledge of provision’s certain arrival and the development of trust in Allah (*tawakkul*). On this he writes that “whoever is preoccupied with what is already guaranteed for him instead of what is demanded of him, his ignorance is great, and his heedlessness is vast”<sup>79</sup> and that “your striving for what has already been guaranteed for you, and your remissness in what is demanded of you, are signs of the blurring of your intellect (*basira*).”<sup>80</sup> While the discussion of *rizq* has come to centre on the fruitlessness of its pursuit, it has done so without contradicting *tawhid*. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s reason for discouraging the pursuit of *rizq* is that it becomes a distraction from obedience towards Allah, which is a way of reiterating that the pursuit of *rizq* is the pursuit of secondary causes.

The second point that the guarantee of *rizq* raises is the lack of specification with regard to its bestowal. According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, this too is deliberate. The fulfilment of needs is not specified “so that the servant may become restless and agitated out of desperation.”<sup>81</sup> He explains that the reason for this is threefold, a) the need for Allah is intensified, b) the individual ceases to rely on their own efforts, and c) it tests the sincerity and commitment of each individual’s trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) so that it may be strengthened. For had “the time, the cause, and the intermediate means been specified, then the slaves would not experience the desperation that exists when these are unknown”<sup>82</sup> and thus the above three impacts would remain unknown. This concealing develops self-knowledge, for “whoever knows his self with its need, poverty, abasement, and humiliation, will know his Lord in His Might, His Authority, His

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>80</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 24.

<sup>81</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab at-Tanwir*, 98.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 98.

Being, and His Beneficence and other similar attributes of perfection.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, like the guarantee of provision, the concealing of its distribution is designed to increase within the individual the conscious awareness of their dependence on Allah.

The problem of *rizq* can now be seen to be at the centre of the Creator/creation paradigm. While *tawhid* ensures that there is no problem with *rizq*, the appearance of the problem of *rizq* is due to its pedagogic function, for, as presented by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it can be utilised to teach and encourage creation to consciously embody their contingency. *Rizq* exists so that creation can become aware of their need of Allah, as the Qur’an states “it is you who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is self-sufficient” (35: 15). In considering this verse, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “need is a doorway to Allah” and a “means of arrival to Him”<sup>84</sup> because through need the individual becomes aware their insufficiency and turns to Allah. Nourishment and food, being, in a sense, the most basic, common, and gross forms of *rizq*, exists for each individual because it gives each and every individual an equal opportunity to recognise their inherent contingency and in turn voids all claims of being ignorant of such contingency. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah recognises the necessity of this, for “if He were to leave them without need, they would have become presumptuous and made pretentious claims.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, the existence of need is inherent to creation in order for creation to become aware of its inherent contingency and, ultimately, to limit all contention with Allah.

It has been seen that for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah there are three domains to be known in order to solve the problem of *rizq*. These three domains, being Allah, creation, and the self, involve knowledge of Allah’s Unicity, the contingency of creation, and the mediation of these two domains within the self. It has been seen that affirming *tawhid* means deferring to Allah. However, the specifics of this have not been explored. The self, being the site of knowing, requires a particular mode of being in order to mediate between a) affirming Allah’s Unicity, b) interacting with creation and c) being aware of the requirements of the self in its changing states. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics can be seen as advancing an etiquette that attends to the threefold requirements of solving the problem of *rizq* without abrogating the requisite commitments to any of the three domains.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 95.

## Chapter 7 – Eschatology

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s eschatology is mentioned less frequently than other topics and, as a result, appears to occupy a less important role within his works. This may seem like a digression from the main theme, and to some degree it is. However, the inclusion of a chapter on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s eschatology is important for three reasons. Firstly, given the importance of eschatological discourse within an Islamic paradigm, it is necessary to see how closely Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview is aligned to this paradigm. Secondly, given that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre contains eschatological material, no study of his work would be complete without it. Thirdly, the relationship of this material to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s overarching soteriological concerns is important for deepening the understanding of the problem of *rizq*. In order to gain a clearer understanding of his eschatology, the implications of his discussion of other domains needs to be drawn out, especially the intimate relation between eschatological and epistemological domains. It can be seen that by holding eschatological views there are transformative ramifications on the epistemic state of the individual, specifically regarding the performance of ethical duties.

### Works on Islamic eschatology

*deal with such questions as the nature of the human being and his relationship with God, the reason for man’s creation, his ultimate good and the manner in which he can achieve it, the various types of individuals that make up the human race and their respective lodging places in the next world, the ontological distinctions between this world and the next, and the interpretation of the data found in the Quran and the Hadith concerning death, resurrection, and heaven and hell.*<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, “eschatology embraces not only teachings about death, resurrection, immortality and judgment, but also the tradition’s understanding of beginnings, the meaning of history and the direction and purpose towards which everything in creation tends” such that “theologically it orients our ultimate purpose and this should be central in its interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> While this

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<sup>1</sup> Chittick, “Eschatology,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 387.

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Hermansen, “Eschatology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 308.

domain encompasses a wide range of topics, this future has the potential to focus in on the present in so far as current events contribute to each individual's ultimate state. Within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, eschatology can be seen to provide much of the impetus for the individual's daily actions, which govern the individual's relationship with Allah. It is suggested here that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's discussion of eschatological issues primarily focuses on its formative ramifications, which is bound to direct the individual to achieve their ultimate good. This "ultimate good" is, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the affirmation of *tawhid*. It may be that a more detailed account has been excluded because, for Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the state of the individual in the hereafter depends on the will of Allah, with which the individual cannot contend, rendering further description, beyond striving for the individual's ultimate good, unnecessary.

One of the primary aspects of Islamic eschatology is the idea of return (*ma'ad*). "The concept of a return to God – both personal and collective – is Qur'anic,"<sup>3</sup> which states "as it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [unto Him] you will return" (7: 29). While "all human life in this lower world (*dunya*) is viewed as a path of return,"<sup>4</sup> discussions of the return (*ma'ad*) are generally divided into discussions of the "voluntary return" (*al-ruju al-ikhtiyari*) and the "compulsory return" (*al-ruju al-idtiyari*) where "the first deals with the path of attaining spiritual perfection in this life, [and] the second with the nature of physical death and bodily resurrection."<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah is explicitly aware of the compulsory return, and it could be said to be prefigured into his discussion of the relation between the metaphysics of *tawhid* and the ontological domain. As a result, rather than detailing the compulsory return, it can be seen to fill a formative function for bringing about an impetus for the voluntary return. In this sense, the voluntary return encompasses the compulsory and, in some ways, exceeds it.

The ontological domain, wherein is the "path of return," is in a state of constant, unrepeatable flux, for "every day He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way" (55: 29). One interpretation of "day" in this verse is that "His 'day' (*yawm*) is the indivisible moment (*an*)."<sup>6</sup> Abu'l Abbas' circumscribing of the four epistemic states of the individual, "of which there is no

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>5</sup> Chittick, "Ibn al-'Arabi's Eschatology," 51.

<sup>6</sup> Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 18. For an extended discussion of the differing kinds of "days," see Mohamed Haj Yousef, *Ibn 'Arabi – Time and Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 51 – 65.

fifth,”<sup>7</sup> can here be considered as four kinds of moments. Given that “wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance” (2: 115), an implication is that every moment is an unrepeatable instant of return (*ma’ad*) within which the individual voluntarily returns through affirming *tawhid* or compulsorily returns as a result of their inherent ontological contingency. As a result, eschatology concerns not only the ends things, but also every instant that leads to them.

### ***Eschatology as an Impetus***

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is aware of the implications of the verse “I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (51: 56). Yet he is also aware that this verse does not appear to give impetus to such worship. Eschatology provides such an impetus for “eschatological doctrines test the limits of our rational and customary experience, thereby reminding us of the fragility of our attachment to conditions that strike us now as unquestionably real.”<sup>8</sup> While provision (*rizq*) in the herenow is given to creation so that they have the time and strength to know and worship Allah, provision for the hereafter does not have the same instant gratification. Yet, the Qur’an still states “and make provision for yourselves - but, verily, the best of all provisions is God-consciousness” (2: 197). For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, “that this world, namely, that part of it which is necessary for your maintenance, is guaranteed for you” because “your afterlife is required of you, i.e. working for it.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, by maintaining an awareness of eschatological issues, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah provides an imminent impetus for soteriological development.<sup>10</sup> While provision for the herenow highlights the ontological poverty of creation, the individual is liable to fall into a state of forgetfulness once they reach satiation. However, the necessity of provision for the hereafter precludes such

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> Hermansen, “Eschatology,” 308.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al Tanwir*, 117.

<sup>10</sup> As a result of his eschatology, it could be argued that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah has a teleological ethics. An issue would then arise as to whether his view is consequentialist or perfectionist, though this would depend on where the focus is placed. For instance, if the hereafter is brought into foreground, it would make him appear to hold the former theory. However, if the herenow is brought into foreground, it would make him appear to hold the latter theory. While such an analysis is beyond the scope of this work, it would appear that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not strictly adhere to either a consequentialist theory or a perfectionist theory of teleological ethics. For a brief overview of teleological ethics within Islam see Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 53 – 56.

forgetfulness because it places an unwavering focus on creation's ontological poverty due to the lack of a) instant gratification and b) the guarantee of such provision.

Yet, while holding an eschatological doctrine can provide impetus, the need for such an impetus can be seen to result from a weak understating of *tawhid*. At the risk of appearing repetitive, it is informative to requote Ibn 'Ata' Allah's view that "ordinary people only sense their great need of God in the face of certain distressing life events," so much so that their "need of God" is fleeting.<sup>11</sup> That eschatological issues provide such as a source of distress, misses a vital point of the relationship between Allah and creation, namely that creation's function is worship. If this essential relationship were recognised then the individual would stand "before Him with the quality of poverty" and raise their "aspiration (*himma*) from other than him."<sup>12</sup> It is for this reason that "the saint is constantly in distress,"<sup>13</sup> for "they would know that their need for God is never-ending."<sup>14</sup> In developing a constant awareness of creation's contingency, their ontological poverty, and the need for Allah, the impetus that an eschatology doctrine gives is, to some degree, redundant for it is superseded by an impetus that results from the affirmation of *tawhid*. From this two things become apparent. Firstly, advancing an eschatological doctrine has a pedagogical function for it instils a sense of creation's inherent ontological poverty in those who cannot sense their constant "need of God." Secondly, even for those who sense their "Need of God," dealing as it does with the ultimate end of an individual, it ensures that the sense of that need is constant throughout the individual's engagement within the herenow.

Beyond the obvious impetus that an eschatological doctrine gives, Ibn 'Ata' Allah draws on the Qur'an to show the potential exaltedness an individual may attain and the eschatological repercussions of such soteriological development. He quotes the verse where Allah addresses the individual "O thou human being that hast attained to inner peace! Return thou unto thy Sustainer, well-pleased [and] pleasing [Him]: enter, then, together with My [other true] servants – yea, enter thou My paradise!" (89: 27 – 30). For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, to be "well-pleased [and] pleasing" are stages of soteriological development which come about due to "complete

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 193.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 193.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.



submission and total reliance upon Him.”<sup>15</sup> Being “well-pleased” is indicated by being “pleased with the Decrees of Allah” and can be seen to involve a high degree of trust in Allah (*tawkkul*). The injunction “return thou unto thy Sustainer” (89: 28), for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, is as if Allah had said “We have permitted you entrance into Our Presence, and eternity in Our paradise,” indicating that in attaining this degree of soteriological development in the herenow Allah has made it incumbent that the recompense is Divine presence and paradise, “which becomes a source of intimacy for it, and mutual tenderness, honor, and love.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, more than just following the commands (*amr*) and prohibitions (*nahy*), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s eschatology sees soteriological development as imperative to the individual’s engagement with the herenow, without abrogating the individual’s pursuit of the hereafter.

An aspect of the individual’s engagement with the herenow that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s eschatology promotes is the pursuit of divine knowledge. On this he states that “souls, after leaving their bodies, are not distinguished from one another save as regards the type of gnosis and knowledge imprinted upon.”<sup>17</sup> The ramifications, with regard to the herenow, are that “nor will you be able, after that separation, to find any kind of gnosis or knowledge except what was there originally,”<sup>18</sup> and such divine knowledge must be acquired before the soul leaves the body. That it is strictly divine knowledge that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is referring to is clear from statements such as “contemplation and vision [in the hereafter] will be commensurate with one’s knowledge of God Most High, His Names and His Attributes.” The vision referred to here may be a reference to the verse wherein the disbeliever, on the Day of Judgment, will ask “O my Sustainer! Why hast Thou raised me up blind, whereas [on earth] I was endowed with sight?” (20: 125) and, as such, vision can be considered as being commensurate with each individual’s knowledge of *tawhid*. In light of this, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s comment that “no one will be more severely chastised on the Day of Judgement than the person who has memorised a verse and then forgotten it” is understandable for the verses of the Qur’an are considered the source of *tawhidic* knowledge par excellence. Thus, the necessity for an epistemology that affirms the metaphysics of *tawhid* is as important for the hereafter as it is for the herenow.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 113.

## ***The Individual and Their Relationship to the Hereafter***

Given the relationship between the hereafter and the herenow, by developing an awareness of the inevitability of the events of the hereafter each individual is able to heighten their awareness of each action they perform. Regarding this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah cites the Hadith which states "whoever sits down in a place and does not remember God therein is subject to God's retribution."<sup>19</sup> He adds that "the etymology of the word *tirah* (retribution) has to do with 'shortcoming'; but here it means 'consequence'."<sup>20</sup> To be forgetful of Allah is to be forgetful of creation's inherent contingency, which is a shortcoming in both knowledge and servitude (*'ubudiyyah*). The Qur'an states "I have not created the invisible beings and man to any end other than that they may worship Me" (51: 56) and one aspect of retribution for not doing so at each moment, or when an individual "sits down in a place," is deprivation. On this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that "deprivation (*al-man'*) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of God in it."<sup>21</sup> While this has been previously quoted with regard to immediate deprivation, it can be read as containing eschatological undertones. Deprivation could be understood to include the denial of paradise (*jannah*), though, as Ibn 'Ata' Allah highlights, even the inhabitants of hell (*jahannan*) have the potential for understanding Allah therein.<sup>22</sup>

## ***The Individual and Their Relationship to the Hereafter in Allah's Foreknowledge***

The individual and their relationship to the hereafter in Allah's foreknowledge can be seen to be intimately connected to the relationship between creation's inherent contingency and destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada'*). Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes, regarding destiny and decree, "know that Allah has for you a destiny that He must enact, and a Decree that He must manifest."<sup>23</sup> At first sight, this passage would imply that Allah is limited, in that "He must enact" and "must

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<sup>19</sup> In *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> See N. 34 below.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 109.

manifest,” though, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s proofs of *tawhid* have shown, this would contradict the attribute of being “master over all possibilities.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, such a reading overlooks the limitations Allah has placed on Himself with regard to the manifestation of the ontological domain.

To draw out the necessity of certain events, and their relation to Allah’s freedom from restriction, some aspects of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view of the Divine attributes (*sifat*) need to be discussed. He writes, “know that praising the attribute is more effective, intense and far-reaching than praising the action” and “that is because the attribute refers to something fixed and established, whereas actions are subject to renewal and cessation.”<sup>25</sup> Taken in conjunction with the passage regarding what “He must enact” and “must manifest,” these quotes provide further insight into Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s view of cause and effect. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, Allah cannot be considered limited in anyway, apart from being other than Allah, for “the imperfect cannot be a god.”<sup>26</sup> However, in Allah’s revealing of Himself to creation in the manner that He has chosen to, indicates that Allah has willingly placed certain restrictions on His Self-manifestation. As mentioned, these restrictions can be seen to result from Allah’s compassionate kindness towards creation. Thus, (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*), as enacted through Allah’s attributes (*sifat*), follow a pattern of cause and effect. This is not because this is the only way that things can be, but because of Allah’s choice for creation. Creation is enjoined to praise Allah’s attributes (*sifat*) for two reasons, a) their fixity ensures Allah’s compassionate kindness towards creation and b) that the attributes are fixed and established means that they are closer Allah’s unchanging ipseity than creation, with their renewal and cessation, drawing the individual away from creation towards Allah. Thus, even though destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) ensures that there are certain things “He must enact” and “must manifest” within the ontological domain, Allah remains “master over all possibilities” for that which is enacted and manifest is done for creation’s soteriological benefit.

Yet, to base everything on destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) potentially leads to antinomianism. Rather than abrogating the necessity of a revealed law (*Shari’a*), destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) can be seen to fulfil a formative role in the soteriological development of the individual. Destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) can provide meaning in even

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<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 143.

the most seemingly accidental of incidents for it reminds the individual that such events are the result of the Divine Will and, as such, contain subtle aspects of the soteriological semiotics that Ibn 'Ata' Allah is attempting to heighten the awareness of. Thus, it is through Allah's foreknowledge of creation that each individual is situated in a position within which, as they proceed towards the hereafter, that they have the greatest potentiality of affirming the metaphysics of *tawhid* at each and every moment in the here and now.

### ***The Hereafter and Allah's Mercy (rahma)***

Ibn 'Ata' Allah's focus on the attributes of beauty (*jamal*) is highlighted in his reporting of Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi's commentary on the verse "Satan is a foe unto you: so treat him as a foe" (35: 6). He stated that

*One group understood from this that Allah ordered them to fight the Shaytan, so they directed their entire aspiration to fighting him, and thus became distracted from the love of the Beloved. Another group understood, "Shaytan is your enemy and I am your Lover," so they became preoccupied with the love of Allah, and by their becoming so preoccupied with Allah, Shaytan was prevented from having his way with over them.<sup>27</sup>*

As Ibn 'Ata' Allah points out, amongst the reasons "Satan was prevented from having his way over them" was because, as the Qur'an states, "he [Satan] has no power over those who have attained to faith and in their Sustainer placed their trust" (16: 99). Even though "Satan is a foe unto you," by focusing on the attributes of beauty (*jamal*) the individual is in a greater position to realise the mercy (*rahma*) that Allah is disposed to enact towards creation and thus reach the point where they may place their trust (*tawakkul*) in their Sustainer.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah is able to capture the differing approaches to Allah's attributes, while illustrating their respective pedagogical roles. He states that "there is no minor sin (*saghira*) when His justice confronts you; and there is no major sin (*kabira*) when His grace confronts you."<sup>28</sup> In being confronted by Allah's attributes of majesty (*jalal*), like "His justice," and taken to account,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 53 – 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 32.

the individual is differentiated from other creations and thus isolated such that “there is no minor sin” because all sins, according to this attribute, reaffirms such isolation. However, Allah’s attributes of beauty (*jamal*), like “His grace,” being inclusive, embraces the individual, and all of creation, such that “there is no major sin.” This distinction between the *jalal* and *jamal* attributes is emphasised in Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s statement:

*When He gives, He shows you His kindness (birr); when He deprives, He shows you His power (qahr). And in all that, He is making Himself known to you and coming to you with His gentleness.*<sup>29</sup>

In this statement Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah deploys his soteriological semiotics to highlight that Allah’s communication with creation happens through all instances confronting the individual with the sole goal of “making Himself known.” Eschatologically, this would imply that even punishment in the hereafter, being a show of “His power,” is a means of “making Himself known.” On this point he quotes Abu’l Hassan who states that “he who wishes that there be no rebellion against Allah in His kingdom has desired that His forgiveness not be manifest.”<sup>30</sup> Given Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s overarching soteriological concern of affirming *tawhid*, it appears that the punishment of the hereafter is a means to such soteriological realisation. This view is not unique to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as can be seen in the following quote from Rumi, which states

*The inhabitants of hell are happier in hell than they were in this world because in hell they are aware of God, while in this world they were not. There is nothing sweeter than the awareness of God.*<sup>31</sup>

By focusing on the attributes of beauty (*jamal*), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah affirms that “you have never left, nor will you ever come out of the circle of His beneficence”<sup>32</sup> and that even the most severe punishment in the hereafter is an aspect of Allah “coming to you with His gentleness.” In one way, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah clarifies the confusion and apparent contradiction between Allah’s mercy and the existence of punishment in writing that “deprivation (*al-man’*) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of God in it.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, suffering would cease if the individual

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *Signs of the Unseen*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Boston: Shambala, 1999), 239.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

were capable of perceiving Allah in such punishment.<sup>34</sup> If *tawhid* is affirmed then gentleness (*birr*) and power (*qahr*) are seen to be just two means of communication between Creator and creation.

### ***Obedience (ta'a) and Disobedience (ma'siya)***

By engaging Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics, obedience (*ta'a*) and disobedience (*ma'siya*) can be seen as mutually exclusive modes through which Allah communicates each creation's status with Him to them. He states that

*To soften for you the suffering of affliction, He has taught you that He is the One who causes trials to come upon you (al-Mubli laka). For the one who confronts you with His decrees of Fate (al-aqdar) is the same who has accustomed you to His good choice (husn al-ikhtiyar).<sup>35</sup>*

As with affliction and trials, obedience and disobedience result from "His good choice" in that "just as He creates obedience by His grace, He creates disobedience by His justice."<sup>36</sup> Allah's creation of disobedience can be considered a mercy in as far as it contains the potential for soteriological development for "sometimes He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause of arriving at Him."<sup>37</sup> One reason that a sin can be "a cause of arriving at Him" is because of the epistemological shift that can result through realizing that such an action contradicts the metaphysics of *tawhid*. Conversely, as an individual's actions within the here-now are the determining factor for their position in the hereafter, all of humanity will be brought before Allah, whether it be through their obedience (*ta'a*) or disobedience (*ma'siya*).

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<sup>34</sup> This view is not unique to Ibn 'Ata' Allah for even "Ibn al-'Arabi's contention that the chastisement of hell will not last forever is hardly new in Islamic thought; even a majority of exoteric theologians were forced to conclude the same thing," Chittick, "Ibn al-'Arabi's Eschatology," 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the creation of obedience can be taken as an injunction for creation to be obedient, though there is also an indication that it is more than a mere injunction. While the verse “I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (51: 56) can be read as such an injunction, it can also be read as a statement of fact. This would be consistent with the metaphysics of *tawhid* for it precludes any possible co-existent alongside of Allah and thus any opposition to the Divine will. This alternate reading gives weight to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah statement that “He knew of the irresolution of servants in dealing with Him, so He made obedience (*ta’a*) to Him obligatory for them.”<sup>38</sup> A consequence of this is that “He made the service (*khidma*) of Him obligatory upon you, which is as much as to say that He made entry into Paradise obligatory for you.”<sup>39</sup> Paradise can here be read in two ways. Firstly, there is the ontological realm of paradise. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s overarching soteriological concern, there is the epistemological paradise of knowing Allah through affirming the metaphysics of *tawhid*. The ontological paradise of the hereafter is for those individuals who attain the epistemological paradise in the herenow. The receipt of punishment in the hereafter, coming as it does after the resurrection and subsequent judgement, is received with an undeniable awareness of Allah’s ipseity. This would mean that such punishment is meant to bring about the epistemological paradise in the hereafter that those individuals failed to gain in the herenow, reaffirming the view that such punishment is meant as a means to soteriological realisation.

Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “what God seeks from His servants is the concentration of their entire beings upon Him”<sup>40</sup> and for this there is a distinction between acts of obedience and acts of disobedience as

*acts of obedience are the causes behind such concentration and the means by which it is achieved, which is why God has commanded them, while acts of disobedience are the causes for separation and the means by which it comes about, which is why God has forbidden them.*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 34 – 35.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 35.

The distance referred to here is not an ontological distance, for this is precluded by the metaphysics of *tawhid*, but rather an epistemological distance, the locus of which is the individual who is ignorant of their inherent contingency and, as a result, perceive independence. This perceived independence, metaphysically false as it may be, is the separation referred to above quote, which creates a distance, so to say, between the individual and Allah. Ontologically, such acts are forbidden because this would contradict the metaphysics of *tawhid*. Epistemologically, such acts have been forbidden for they are against the reason for creation, namely that humanity was not created “to any end other than they may [know and] worship Me” (51: 56).

Regarding the judgment, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “the pretenders are held to account, and the heedless are questioned, those who perceive themselves as owning dominion, or as being independent active agents alongside Allah.”<sup>42</sup> From this it appears that it is the degree to which the individual embodies *tawhid* that determines the eschatological status of the individual. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah reminds the individual of their ontological poverty (*faqr*), for either through the judgment or through the knowledge of *tawhid* “they come to know that they do not own anything with Allah ... it is only a secondary attribution attached to you.”<sup>43</sup> Those who embody *tawhid* in the herenow are aware that their inherent contingency precludes the possibility of ownership in the sense of outright possession.

### ***The Paradox of the Life to Come***

It might appear that for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, while *rizq* is guaranteed for creation in the present life, that obedience to Allah’s proscriptions and prohibitions are the means to *rizq* in the afterlife. This view is sustained by statements like “He is the One by Whom subsist the world and the hereafter, Who establishes the world with His freely given sustenance, and the hereafter with His rewarding.”<sup>44</sup> From this it appears that there here now and the hereafter subsist in differing modes, as the former requires sustenance for it is perishing while the latter is given as recompense. Given Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s epistemology, it could be said that Allah freely gives

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<sup>42</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 25.



sustenance to the herenow so that creation can subsist with the knowledge of Lordship, whereas creation subsists in the hereafter as reward to the degree that Allah's Lordship is recognised. Yet, this touches on two, seemingly, paradoxical issues. The first issue is connected to Allah's knowledge and Ibn 'Ata' Allah's comments that it is imperative to "know that things have a certain being in the foreknowledge of Allah" and that "the Real takes charge and regulates its affairs while it is in His foreknowledge,"<sup>45</sup> potentially affecting the individual's impetus to act and making them liable of antinomianism. The second issue is connected to the seeming incongruence of Allah's mercy and the punishment of the hereafter, given that Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that "you have never left, nor will you ever come out of the circle of His beneficence."<sup>46</sup> This seeming incongruence highlights a differing conceptualisation of the punishment of the hereafter than is generally given, which can be seen to result from a greater focus being placed on Allah's attributes of beauty (*jamal*). These two issues will be dealt with in turn.

Regarding the first issue of Allah's foreknowledge, there is an important relation between *rizq* and trust (*tawakkul*). With regard to the herenow, it has been seen that the individual's pursuit of *rizq* without contending with its bestowal is indicative of that individual's trust in Allah (*tawakkul*). With regard to the hereafter, the exhibiting of trust is taken further. Commenting on the verse "and there is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God; and He knows its time-limit [on earth] and its resting-place [after death]" (11: 6), Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that *rizq* is "a guarantee He has undertaken for the sake of His servants, as a way of making His love known to them."<sup>47</sup> As Ibn 'Ata' Allah has previously indicated, those who exhibit servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) know that *rizq* is only from Allah and that its bestowal is indicative of Allah's preference for His creation. Yet, as there are two 'places' of provision, the herenow and the hereafter, the former impermanent and the later permanent, the foregoing, or even denial, of the impermanent provision in preference to the permanent provision is indicative of a greater degree of trust in, and dependence on, Allah because the satisfaction of this worldly provision is instantaneous, whereas there is only access to the hope for provision in the hereafter during the herenow. However, as all *rizq* is from Allah, Ibn 'Ata' Allah would be aware that the Qur'an verse cited equally ensures the provision necessary for all transactions during the hereafter, especially given that the herenow is the means to such provision.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 121.

Regarding the second issue, there is a seeming incongruence between the punishment of the hereafter and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s views of Allah’s mercy (*rahma*). This is even more so given some of the account of said punishment found in the Hadith literature. Nevertheless, the punishment of the hereafter, while acting as a deterrent and giving an impetus for action in the herenow, can be seen as a means of bringing about soteriological development in the hereafter that was meant to be gained in the herenow. In achieving this, the punishment in the hereafter can be seen to bring each individual to a point where they can realize Allah’s Unicity and embody the metaphysics of *tawhid*, for failing to do so would be seen as a punishment from which there is no redemption. If Allah were to exclude anyone from realizing His Unicity, then this would be seen as an abrogation of His mercy (*rahma*) irrespective of the means through which it was realized.

### ***The Soteriological Elements of Eschatology***

Rather than being strictly teleological, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s eschatology places a sense of immediacy on the individual. This sense of immediacy is intended to place within the individual an impetus for soteriological development. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the connection between the return to Allah (*ma’ad*) and soteriological development is clearly stated in the Qur’anic verses:

*O thou human being that hast attained to inner peace! Return thou unto thy Sustainer, well-pleased [and] pleasing [Him]: enter, then, together with My [other true] servants – yea, enter thou My paradise! (89: 27 – 30)*

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah distinguishes three degrees of soteriological development, namely “commanding toward the evil (*ammara*), self-reproaching (*lawwama*), and at rest (*mutma’inna*),”<sup>48</sup> and notices that, in these verses, “He directed His speech towards the third”<sup>49</sup> such “that no permission is granted for returning to Allah (in the manner of the noble) for the soul that incites to evil or the self-blaming soul.”<sup>50</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah “this is an arousal for the believers to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 90.

acquire this station of peace for themselves” for its recompense is entrance into paradise.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the acquisition of this soteriological station is not achieved in the hereafter, after the individual has already returned, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges “it indicates that he cannot attain to the good pleasure of Allah with him in the hereafter until he is pleased with Allah here in this world.”<sup>52</sup> The recompense of paradise is given to those who have attained to inner peace (*mutma’inna*) for the “attributes and characteristics of the soul at peace are what prepared it and allowed it to be summoned to enter in the company of His slaves, and to enter His Garden.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, the site of return (*ma’ad*), namely the herenow, is also the site of soteriological development, which, in turn, means that eschatology focuses the individual on the transformative potential within each and every action as they are performed.<sup>54</sup>

The state of being well-pleased with Allah can be seen to involve many virtues. Being well-pleased involves, amongst other things, contentment with, and trust in, Allah’s choice. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “he who wishes that at a given moment there appear other than what God has manifested in it, has not left ignorance behind at all.”<sup>55</sup> The desire for circumstances to be other than they are involves a lack of both contentment with and trust in Allah’s choice and is indicative of not being well-pleased with Allah. With this Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah provides the individual with a semiotic key to preclude any claim to a soteriological state that they do not possess. Another such semiotic key can be found in the following quote

*Were the light of certitude (nur al-yakin) to shine, you would see the Hereafter so near that you could not move towards it, and you would see that the eclipse of extinction had come over the beauties of the world (mahasin ad-dunya).<sup>56</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>54</sup> This view is not unique to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it can also be seen in Ibn ‘Arabi who “holds that a person’s outward situation at the resurrection and what follows depends totally upon what he has made of himself in this world,” Chittick, “Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Eschatology,” 67.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 43.

Here is it possible to see the epistemic shift that occurs with the attainment of certainty (*yakin*). For those who “see the Hereafter so near” there is an indication that they have developed a degree of certainty (*yakin*) and for those who do not see this are precluded from any claim of certainty (*yakin*). Thus, the individual’s relationship to the hereafter is taken up within the soteriological semiotics to help the individual understand their soteriological development.

Another aspect that eschatology places an immediate focus on the individual is the correlation between the end of time and the death of the individual. It has been noted that “the experience of death for the microcosm corresponds to the coming of the Hour for the macrocosm” such that “the Qur’anic accounts of the end of the world can also be understood as referring to the death of the individual.”<sup>57</sup> This can be further divided into the inevitable death of the individual at the end of their life and the voluntary death involving the cessation of an ego-centered epistemological framework. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s focus on this voluntary death can be seen to be connected with his focus on the attributes of mercy. The pursuit of the voluntary death, or more specifically the death of the ego-centered epistemological framework, can be seen to come about through the individual’s choice of action. The choice of a God-centered epistemological framework, while resulting in soteriological development, manifests itself in ethical decisions.

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<sup>57</sup> Chittick, “Eschatology,” 398.

## Chapter 8 – Ethics

Within the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah ethics and ethical behaviour (*adab*) has a central role. Ethics is significant within his work for it plays a connective role between the abstractness of *tawhid* and its affirmation through soteriological development. This chapter will examine this role in order to highlight the ethical domain as the arena within which the solution to the problem of *rizq* is enacted. This is important for it is not until the solution is enacted that the problem of *rizq* can be resolved. One important aspect of ethical behaviour (*adab*) is the role played by the figure of Muhammad. In acting as a touchstone for embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*, the prophet Muhammad is seen as the example par excellence from which ethical behaviour (*adab*) should be gained and intimately connected with the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-nabuwah*). This is part of what it means to acknowledge that “Muhammad is the messenger of Allah” (*muhammadur rasulu’llah*).

*Adab* is an umbrella term. Depending on its use it can mean ethics, ethical behaviour, cultured, polite, courteous, good manners, decency, and rules of conduct, amongst others. The rules of good manners (*adab*) are many and the literature discussing these within Islam generally, and Sufism specifically, is extensive, though it could be surmised that their common goal is to aid in developing an *adib*, an individual who constantly displays *adab*.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works multiple examples of and requirements for *adab* are listed. Rather than examining the actions that constitute good manners, this chapter will focus on the role *adab* plays within the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. By examining the importance of *adab*, its function, the process of acquisition, and its degrees, it will emerge that, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *adab* is not limited to a human to human exchange. Rather, its wider significance encompasses the comportment of the individual in each and every moment irrespective of who, what, or where they may be. Ultimately *adab* can be seen to be integral to developing an awareness of the relationship between Creator and creature.

### *The Importance of adab*

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the various meanings of *adab* and its particular importance within Sufi literature, see Qamar-ul Huda, “The Light Beyond the Shore in the Theology of Proper Sufi Moral Conduct (*Abab*),” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 462 – 463.

Much of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's approach to, and importance placed on, *adab* can be seen to be a direct result of the approach of Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili. Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili's approach was to "emphasise the importance of man's internal development over against his external behaviour and ostentation" and to highlight this he "took a negative attitude toward begging and wearing distinctive clothing," which had become a part of Mamluk court protocol of his time, and "is said to have dressed with elegance," also he "did not take part in the gatherings that induced trances or involved spectacular phenomena."<sup>2</sup> This shows Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili to be an advocate of 'sober' Sufism. Furthermore, as it occurs within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, it illustrates an emphasis on internal development whilst realising that such development arises through adhering to a specific set to behaviours, for it is acknowledged that the exponents of the Shadhiliyya "tended to play down the importance of saintly miracles, preaching instead self-restraint and sobriety in word and deed."<sup>3</sup> While this approach makes a contradistinction between an internal development of virtues and an external adherence to moral actions, they are in no way seen as contradicting nor does one abrogate the other, otherwise Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili would not have said: "If your mystical unveiling (*kashf*) diverges from the Qur'an and Sunna, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling; tell yourself that the Qur'an and Sunna is guaranteed by God Most High, which is not the case with the unveiling inspiration and mystical perceptions."<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* is deliberate in that these are the sources from which *adab* is derived.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the Shadhiliyya in general, and Ibn 'Ata' Allah specifically, it is important to notice that the emphasis on *adab* is not at the expense of metaphysical speculation. While it is acknowledged that "al-Shadhili's spiritual method emphasised the practical aspects of mysticism," this is not, as the preceding chapters show, as some have held "over against the more metaphysically oriented mysticism of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers."<sup>6</sup> While it might be true that Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili "saw little value in the speculative exercise of reason,"<sup>7</sup> it is

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<sup>2</sup> Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 210.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sha'rani quoted by Lory, "al-Shadhili," 171.

<sup>5</sup> This connects directly to the comments on the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*) in chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 210.

possible to see within both his litanies (*ahzab*) and the accounts of him<sup>8</sup> a highly developed metaphysics, which follows from the metaphysics of his teacher Ibn Bashish, and is later developed by Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Furthermore, the rejection of the "speculative exercise of reason" is equally apparent in Ibn 'Ata' Allah, who keeps reason orientated towards an applicable end, without a diminished metaphysics.<sup>9</sup>

In order to highlight the centrality of *adab* within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre it is useful to repeat a quote he uses by Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi, which states,

*There are four times in which the servant will find himself, of which there is no fifth: blessing, affliction, obedience, and disobedience. In each of these times, there is an aspect of servanthood which the Truth requires of you by virtue of His lordship. If it is a time of obedience, your path is to bear witness to God's grace, since it is He who has guided you into this obedience and has made it possible for you. If it is a time of disobedience, your path is to seek God's forgiveness and repent. If it is a time of blessing, your path is to give thanks, which means for your heart to rejoice in God. If it is a time of affliction, your path is to be content with God's decree and to endure patiently.<sup>10</sup>*

That this advice delimited the four possible epistemic states which could be considered as the four doors at the centre of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics. Abu'l Abbas also demarcates the four keys, which can now be seen as the necessary moral action for passing through each door. As he is adamant that there are only four times "of which there is no fifth" that an individual will find themselves in, this can be seen as delimiting the moral responses necessary for traversing these four states. Furthermore, there being "no fifth" indicates that all events can be categorised as one of these four kinds, blessing, affliction, obedience, or disobedience. Identifying the 'kind' of event also identifies the morally acceptable response required for traversing it, for the responses are also limited to four.

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<sup>8</sup> Apart from Ibn 'Ata' Allah's *Lata'if al-Minan*, which is the earliest, the other known accounts of Abu'l Hassan al-Shadhili's life are by Ibn Sabbagh, *Mystical Teachings*, and another is discussed by Honerkamp, "A Biography."

<sup>9</sup> This can be seen in Ibn 'Ata' Allah's use of proofs in chapter 4 above.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 251.

While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah utilises what appears to be a simple demarcation of potential *adab* responses, because it encompasses all possible events, it illustrates that each moment has a corresponding *adab* requirement. Regarding this he writes that

*it is possible to fulfil some obligations at times, but it is impossible to fulfil the obligations of every moment, for there is no moment wherein God does not hold against you a new obligation or a definite matter*<sup>11</sup>

That there is “no fifth” means that the servant will constantly alternate between the four kinds of events, though as one leads into another there is perpetuity to this cycle. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is clear that not all obligations towards Allah can be fulfilled and this can be seen result from creations inherent contingency, for the limitations that contingency imposes ensures that “it is impossible to fulfil the obligations of every moment.” That not all obligations of *adab* can be fulfilled may be an extension of creation’s ontological makeup, as it was acknowledged that “error and fault are a fundamental part of your existence, nay, even the source (*‘ayn*) of your existence”<sup>12</sup> and, for this reason, “the slave is never free of shortcoming.”<sup>13</sup> This emphasises the constancy of maintaining *adab*. Furthermore, it is antecedent to the discussion of mistakes below.

Due to its centrality, *adab* can be seen to be a key element of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics. It can be seen that, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, due to creation’s inherent contingency, it is not possible to extricate oneself from cause and effect.<sup>14</sup> Being an aspect of creation’s ontological makeup, cause and effect ensures that the requirement of *adab* is, in a sense, isotropic. This highlights one aspect of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s saying that “you striving for what has already been guaranteed for you, and your remissness in what is demanded of you, are signs of the blurring of your intellect (*basira*).”<sup>15</sup> In this context, “what is demanded of you”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah miracles are bound by cause and effect for he states that “a miracle serves to unsettle doubts concerning Divine grace, [and] to [bring about] experiential knowledge of God’s bounty,” Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 85, indicating that they are, in a sense, caused by a lack of certainty (*yakin*) and their effect is to bring about its subsequent increase.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 24.



refers to the requirements of *adab*, which, due to creation's inherent contingency and the existence of cause and effect, is constant regardless of individual circumstances. This is one reason for the importance of the above demarcation and correctly identifying each successive event. Furthermore, due to this constancy, to be remiss of the *adab* that "is demanded of you," even if only momentarily, is indicative of a "blurring of your intellect (*basira*)," namely a lack of self-knowledge, which is crucial for soteriological development. Thus, the importance of *adab* is not over and above other domains such as metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, or any other domain, rather *adab* acts as a connector between the other domains in as far as they are embodied within and enacted by the individual.

### ***The Function of adab***

One of the primary functions of *adab* is in its ability to aid the individual in embodying *tawhid* within a domain of multiplicity. For "what cannot be articulated conceptually can nonetheless be worked out in the way one lives, so the faith in Divine Unity (*tawhid*) which reminds us forcibly that the prime analogate for 'agent' is the Creator, can be lived out in a life of trust in Divine providence (*tawakkul*)."<sup>16</sup> This shows that the focus of the ethical individual (*adib*) is, rather than choosing how to respond to an event, to find what response is applicable. In doing so, the individual puts aside their self-centeredness and, in choosing the action proscribed by Allah through the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, maintains and embodies *tawhid* through a God-centred consciousness.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the existence of clearly defined *adab* aids in effacing personal choice and embodying *tawhid*. He writes that "the way of arriving to Allah is through the effacement of personal choice, and the rejection of personal choice."<sup>17</sup> This effacement cannot be an ontological effacement for creation cannot transcend its inherent contingency. Rather, Ibn 'Ata' Allah is advocating an epistemological effacement. That is where personal choice is abrogated by obligations to Allah, which are, in turn, enacted through creation. A connection between his view of *adab* and his metaphysics of *tawhid* can be seen in statements such as "whosoever

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<sup>16</sup> Burrell, "Creation," 155.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 41.

negates his nature by 'There is no divinity' (*la ilaha*) affirms His being by 'but God' (*illa'llah*).<sup>18</sup> It is through *adab* that one "negates his nature" by negating one's choices and affirming the proscribed actions which, in turn, "affirms His being." In this sense, servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) is developing and maintaining correct *adab*.

If effacement is taken to be an aspect of the process of *adab*, then servanthood or the station of servitude (*'ubudiyyah*) is the goal. Regarding this Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes "know that the most sublime abiding station in which the servant could be established is the station of servitude; and know also that all other stations of the Path are a way to it, 'serving' it."<sup>19</sup> In explaining the ramifications of this, he quotes the Qur'anic verse that states "I have not created the invisible beings and man to any end other than that they may worship Me" (51: 56). In quoting this verse it is evident that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's intention is to draw out the relation between worship and servitude, which he states as "worship (*'ibada*) is the outer form of servitude, and servitude is its spirit."<sup>20</sup> Worship is the means through which servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) is established and, once it has become an "abiding station," servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) enlivens worship in a continuing process. It is a continuing process as "the spirit of servitude and its secret is to abandon self-choice (*ikhtiyar*), and not contest with the Divine Decrees,"<sup>21</sup> one of which is worship as established in the previous Qur'anic verse. *Adab*, in as far as it is Divinely prescribed, effaces self-choice and, through such effacement, opens to servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*).

## ***The Process of adab***

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, it can be seen that there is a process in developing and increasing one's *adab*. As *adab* is a means to soteriological development there are certain practices that he recommends for heightening such development. However, the implementation of *adab*, especially when judging the success of such implementation, is not a self-regulatory process.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 36. It is important to note that Ibn 'Ata' Allah takes Qur'anic passages, including, 8: 42, 17: 1, 19: 2, and 72: 19, as his evidence for calling *'ubudiyyah* "the most sublime station."

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

While “whoever knows himself knows his Lord,”<sup>22</sup> this refers to real self-knowledge and not some deceptive smokescreen presented by the ego. This lack of self-knowledge is one of the reasons that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “when two matters seem confusing to you, see which is heavier on the ego and follow it through” because even though self-knowledge is lacking for soteriological development “nothing weighs on the ego but that which is true.”<sup>23</sup>

While there is a correct response for each situation, the process of *adab* does involve an element of trial and error. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that “the business is not that you do not do wrong actions, the business is that you do not persist in wrong action.”<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be again reiterating the sentiment of the Hadith which states that “had you not committed sins, Allah would have brought into existence a creation that would have committed sin (and Allah) would have forgiven them.”<sup>25</sup> The point of this is that in committing a mistake, repenting, and turning from it to draw closer to Allah, a drawing that proceeds indefinitely according to the capacity of the individual, the individual draws closer to Allah than they would have had they not committed this mistake. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah shows an acute awareness of this in stating that “sometimes He opens the door of obedience for you but not the door of acceptance; or sometimes He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause of arriving at Him” and that “a disobedience that bequeaths humiliation and extreme need is better than an obedience that bequeaths self-infatuation and pride.”<sup>26</sup> To emphasise this point Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “a disobedience that bequeaths humiliation and extreme need is better than an obedience that bequeaths self-infatuation and pride.”<sup>27</sup> Mistakes have a pedagogic function and an important aspect of this is their ability to highlight the “extreme need” or ontological poverty of creation towards Allah. The necessity of this aspect of the process of *adab* can be seen to arise due to creation’s inherent contingency which ensures a degree of fallibility. The degree of fallibility highlights an aspect of agency within creation. While fallibility is an intrinsic aspect of creation, it can be seen that creation’s fallibility is not the aspect which is condemned by Allah, rather it is the persistence in an action that has been shown to be fallible that is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 54. See above Chap 6 n.7.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, # 6620.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

condemned. This point is confirmed in the following Hadiths which state that if an individual “has intended a bad deed and has not done it, Allah writes it down with Himself as a full good deed,”<sup>28</sup> indicating that while individuals are liable to have bad intentions it is only those that are acted upon that are condemned, and “follow up a bad deed with a good one and it will wipe it out,”<sup>29</sup> indicating that while an individual’s actions are likely to manifest a degree of fallibility, that fallibility is only counted against them if they persist in engaging in it and fail to repent and make amends.

### ***Forgetfulness (ghaflah) and Remembrance (dhikr)***

One type action which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah highlights as being at the foremost cause of all subsequent errors is forgetfulness (*ghaflah*). The perniciousness of forgetfulness lies in its presupposition of possessing knowledge that is subsequently overlooked. In his discussion of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) it is likely that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah had in mind the Qur’anic verse:

*And whenever thy Sustainer brings forth their offspring from the loins of Adam, He [thus] calls upon them to bear witness about themselves: “Am I not your Sustainer?” – to which they answer: “Yea, indeed, we do bear witness thereto!” [Of this We remind you,] lest you say on the Day of Resurrection, “Verily we were unaware of this” (7: 172)*

This covenant, taken in pre-eternity, is taken as evidence of humanity’s knowledge of its inherent ontological contingency and poverty and of humanity’s inability to claim “we were unaware of this.” Forgetfulness alters the outlook of the individual, affecting their epistemology, for “when the forgetful man (*al-ghafil*) gets up in the morning he reflects on what he is going to do, whereas the intelligent man (*al-‘aqil*) sees what God is doing with him.”<sup>30</sup> Forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) results in a self-centred consciousness, while Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is advocating for a God-centred consciousness.

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<sup>28</sup> In an-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith*, 116.

<sup>29</sup> In *ibid.*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 40.

To combat forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) Ibn 'Ata' Allah proscribes remembrance (*dhikr*). He states that the "remembrance of God is liberation from ignorance and forgetfulness through the permanent presence of the heart with Truth."<sup>31</sup> While it is evident that by 'remembrance' Ibn 'Ata' Allah specifically means the 'remembrance of Allah', his definition of what constitutes remembrance is so broad that "whosoever observes what God has commanded and abstains from what God has forbidden is one who remembers God."<sup>32</sup> There is a symbiotic relationship between forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) and remembrance (*dhikr*) in that "only he to whom forgetfulness is possible is to be reminded; and only he to whom inattention is possible is to be warned."<sup>33</sup> Thus, for the one who forgets,

*remembrance is used to strengthen one's presence with God Most High, to maintain the proper conduct towards Him, to guard against heedlessness, as a refuge from the accursed devil, and to help foster the attentiveness of the heart during acts of worship*<sup>34</sup>

While it could be suggested that each of these benefits of remembrance are reiterations of a the key point from differing angles, it is interesting, given Ibn 'Ata' Allah's broad definition, to see that "maintaining the proper conduct towards Him" is another aspect of observing "what God has commanded" and worshipping Him. This is a clear indication that *adab* is a) a component of worship and b) a key component in combating forgetfulness.

## ***The Degrees of adab***

Within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works there are two ways to distinguish varying degrees of *adab*. These can be distinguished as degrees of acquisition and degrees of implementation. Whilst it should be acknowledged that such a distinction is artificial it is useful for highlighting varying aspects of the degrees of *adab*. Regarding the acquisition of *adab*, Ibn 'Ata' Allah recommends seeking the company of others who have good *adab*. The reason for this, he writes, is that "the self is naturally inclined to imitation and resemblance, and to adorning itself with the characteristics

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 46 – 47.

of those it associates with, thereby becoming like them” such that “your companionship with the heedless causes heedlessness.”<sup>35</sup> However, he is quick to point out that merely attaining the company of others is not enough for “company is a form, and *adab* is its *ruh* [spirit],” indicating that *adab* is the internal compliment of company, such that “if you join the form and the *ruh* [spirit], you will benefit of their company” yet without its internal compliment “your company is a corpse.”<sup>36</sup> This indicates that the company of an individual with good manners (*adib*) is only soteriologically beneficial if their example is used to help establish and maintain *adab* within oneself.

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is insistent on being scrupulous in choosing the right company. He states “do not keep company with anyone whose state does not inspire you and whose speech does not lead you to God.”<sup>37</sup> He further demarcates the minimum criteria for those whose company is to be kept, stating,

*Shaykh Abu’l Hassan said: “If the faqir who is occupied with his means of livelihood does not observe the following four properties (adab), attach no importance to him, even if he be the most knowledgeable of men. They are: avoiding oppressors – preferring the people of the other world – relieving the poor – and constancy in the five prayers with the congregation.”*<sup>38</sup>

While each of these, to varying degrees, are obvious signs of piety, their combination marks the minimum *adab* for inspiring others and leading them to realise their inherent contingency and ontological poverty. While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah draws on the Qur’an and the Hadith in justifying each of the four properties as virtues, consistent across each justification is the idea that these properties maintain and strengthen, for the individual who observes them, the means of realising and embodying creation’s inherent ontological poverty. By avoiding oppressors the practice of religion is secure, the people of the other world, here meaning “the friends of Allah (*awliya*),”<sup>39</sup> aid in the implementation of *adab*, the poor are a symbolic reminder of each creation’s ontological poverty and their aid helps in detaching from contingent things, while

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<sup>35</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 81 – 82.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

maintaining the congregational prayers both strengthens the resolve of the attendees and removes each individual from their worldly pursuits to refocus and reorient themselves towards Allah.<sup>40</sup> These four properties ensure for those who observe them the minimum for constancy in *adab* such that, without even one of these, their soteriological development would stagnate and could not be considered as fitting company for those who desire further soteriological development.

In implementing *adab* the company of others is informative. For soteriological development Ibn 'Ata' Allah recommends that an individual keep company with a *faqir* for "the *faqir* is the one who casts off secondary causes and turns away from hindrances" and has "realised the reality of *la ilaha ill'Allah Muhammadan Rasulu'llah*."<sup>41</sup> Their "casting off secondary causes" is a direct indication of their company with Allah and their realisation of the *kalimah* is indicative of their embodiment of *tawhid*. The reasoning behind keeping a *faqir's* company is that they are able to "make you recognise the Path and he [the *faqir*] will surmount the steep roads for you and remove impediments from your heart."<sup>42</sup> In having undergone soteriological development, the *faqir*, in a sense, knows the road and is able to steer the aspirant around various stumbling blocks which can cause impediment, such that "when the seeker finds a guide, then let him obey what he orders him to do, and let him abstain from what he prohibits or restrains him from doing."<sup>43</sup> In doing so, the aspirant is able shorten the 'journey' of embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid* due to their avoiding impediments. Furthermore, the *faqir* acts as a tangible example of an ethical individual (*adib*) and as such can be used to highlight ways of embodying the virtues necessary for soteriological development. For these reasons, amongst others, Ibn 'Ata' Allah advises "get his company and have *adab* in his assembly."<sup>44</sup>

Yet the company of a *faqir* is not the goal. The *faqir's* company is meant to be a means to having company with Allah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes "prepare for this behaviour with your brothers, the *fuqara'*, so that it will become a stairway for you by which you obtain access to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 82 – 83.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 7

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Unwan al-Tawfiq*, 7.

behaving with the Lord of heaven.”<sup>45</sup> The reason why the company with the *fuqara*’ is a preliminary measure is because “they take on the character of their Master, as it is related, ‘take on the good character of Allah’.”<sup>46</sup> The importance of this passage is threefold in that a) it shows that the ultimate example for *adab* is Allah, b) by taking on “the character of their Master” the *fuqara*’ strive for harmony between the contingent and the absolute, and c) following on from the previous point, it is through *adab* that *tawhid* is affirmed and, in a sense, experienced within multiplicity. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be read as commenting on this last point when he states that “when you see Allah as the Doer in all you see all beings as agreeable,”<sup>47</sup> for in knowing that creation acts in accordance with *tawhid*, as Allah is the Doer, nothing can be considered disagreeable for this would be contending with Allah. This relates directly to having trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) as previously discussed.

## ***Adab with Allah***

*Adab* culminates in developing a good etiquette towards Allah. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah quotes a Hadith that states “God Most High says, ‘I am of the same thinking as my servant is towards Me,’”<sup>48</sup> which can be seen as a key to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s ethics. This Hadith gives impetus to develop and implement *adab*, for the way the servant thinks of Allah will be returned to them. To think good of Allah involves knowledge of Allah and, as “whoever knows himself knows his Lord,” this involves both knowledge of *tawhid* and knowledge of creations inherent ontological poverty. To ensure that such knowledge improves each individual’s thinking of Allah, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes “if you have not improved your thinking of Him because of His nature, improve it because of His treatment of you.”<sup>49</sup> As “the reward of deeds depends upon the intentions,”<sup>50</sup> by improving ones thinking of Allah, as a result of knowledge, the intentions are correspondingly raised. In turn, better etiquette is developed because the individual’s thinking of Allah has improved, as have their intention.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 59 – 60.

<sup>49</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, # 1.



Whilst *adab* with Allah can be seen as a particular tier of etiquette, above other such tiers, it is also to be understood as the zenith in the hierarchy of tiers for it encompasses all subsequent tiers. There is a Hadith Qudsi within which Allah states

*O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant So-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that with Me?*<sup>51</sup>

This can be read as a clear indication that maintaining good manners with creation is, in accordance with *tawhid*, maintaining them with Allah. However, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah shows an awareness of the difficulty of a) maintaining an awareness of this implication and b) maintaining a corresponding degree of etiquette. He writes that “outwardly, creatures (*al-akwan*) are an illusion (*ghirra*), but, inwardly, they are an admonition (*‘ibra*)”<sup>52</sup> indicating that a) abiding with creatures, rather than Allah, is an admonition from Allah for it indicates a weakness of the awareness of *tawhid* and b) when abiding with Allah, it is through creatures that Allah’s admonition comes. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “if you want to know your standing with Him, look at where He has made you abide now,”<sup>53</sup> indicating that one’s position within creation is indicative of one’s relation with Allah. The development of *adab* with Allah does not result in an ontological effacement of creatures. Rather, the realisation that “creatures (*al-akwan*) are an illusion (*ghirra*)” is an epistemological reorientation which leaves creation’s contingent ‘reality’ intact while realising that they are a pedagogical trope that enacts a soteriological semiotics. Thus, the primacy and Unity of Allah is affirmed through engagement with the multiplicity of ontologically contingent creatures.

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<sup>51</sup> In Ibrahim and Johnson-Davies, *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, # 18.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 36.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

## ***Adab and rizq***

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah there is a direct connection between *adab* and *rizq*. Citing the Qur’anic passage “enter houses through their doors” (2: 189), he comments that “the door of *rizq* is the obedience to the All-Provider” and that “His provision is not sought after except through obedience to Him.”<sup>54</sup> *Adab*, within these passages, involves obedience to Allah, which is an aspect of ‘*ubudiyyah*. Central to obedience to Allah is God-wariness (*taqwa*) for he writes that “God-wariness (*taqwa*) is the key to the two provisions: the *rizq* of this world, and the *rizq* of the Next World.”<sup>55</sup> An increase in provision can be seen to arise through correct *adab* with regard to Allah, so much so that it is arguable that this is the sole source of “the *rizq* of the Next World,” which comes about through a heightened awareness of and focus on the primacy of Allah. Correct *adab* implies the knowledge and perception of the principles of creation’s ontological foundations, the primary of which is *tawhid*. It is important to make a distinction between the knowledge of and the perception of these principles for this knowledge ensures that the correct responses are known independently of particulars while the perception of these principles ensures the correct employment of these responses within particular circumstances. Thus, the existence of *rizq*, in a sense, necessitates *adab*, which in turn, due to its centrality within contingent existence, ensures that each creation have a minimum understanding of the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

It is now possible to examine the connection between *adab* and *rizq* in the Qur’anic injunction “I have not created the invisible beings and men to any other end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (51: 56). For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, in this verse it is as if Allah said “I do not want from them that they should sustain themselves” and that “I do not want them to provide for themselves, because I am the Provider for them,” such that “this verse includes the following: guaranteeing the slaves their provisions.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, beyond the guarantee of *rizq* there is the injunction to worship Allah and, in doing so, places a focus on the development of *adab* through following that which required of creation. These points can be seen to be covered in the aphorisms a) “rest yourself from self-direction (*tadbir*), for what Someone Else (*ghayruka*) has carried out on your behalf, do not yourself undertake to do it” and b) “your striving for

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<sup>54</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 120.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

what has been guaranteed to you, and your remissness in what is demanded of you, are signs of the blurring of your intellect (*basira*).<sup>57</sup> In both instances, “what Someone Else (*ghayruka*) has carried out on your behalf” and “what has been guaranteed to you” refers to provision, *rizq*. He enjoins his reader “do not yourself undertake to do it,” namely seeking *rizq*, and to do so is a “blurring of your intellect (*basira*)” because Allah did not create “the invisible beings and men to any other end” than worship (51: 56), including seeking provision, and as such can be considered “guaranteed to you.” Thus, to pursue “any other end” than worship is to show poor *adab* towards Allah in His position as Creator and Sustainer.

Whilst *rizq* is generally conceived as being relevant only within the realm of creation, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is insistent on not seeing creation as an end-in-itself. As in his likening movement from creation to creation to a donkey going in circles within a mill, he cites the Qur’anic verse “in heaven is your sustenance” (51: 22) to reiterate this point, stating that this “implies the lifting of the aspirations (*himma*) of the creation from the creatures, and that they not ask except from the True King.”<sup>58</sup> There is a twofold motion that such a turning to the “True King” implies, for firstly it directs the individual away from secondary and contingent means and secondly it directs the individual’s aspirations towards Allah. In turning towards Allah the individual comes to affirm *tawhid* in their pursuit of *rizq*. Yet, this is not a pursuit of *rizq* in the sense of trying to gather it oneself or in attempting to increase it. Rather, it involves displaying the correct *adab* towards Allah and creation with the knowledge and trust (*tawakkul*) that *rizq* will come as and when it is required.<sup>59</sup>

## ***Anxiety over Rizq***

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah discusses at length the relationship between pursuing *rizq* and the subsequent anxiety felt by the individual. Due to the existence of such anxiety, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah sees the existence of a “means of livelihood” as “a consolation for their selves” from Allah due to “their

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<sup>57</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 23 – 24.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Rumi Collection*, ed. Kabir Helminski (Boston: Shambala, 1998), 66, can be seen to commenting on this point when he writes “Don’t seek the water; increase your thirst.”

incapacity of attaining to the reality of sincere trust in Allah.”<sup>60</sup> The existence of a means of livelihood is taken to be indicative of Allah’s mercy (*rahma*) towards creation in that it grants the individual the feeling of security with regard to their provision. Yet, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, the existence of a means of livelihood is indicative of more than just Allah’s mercy (*rahma*) and he illustrates its pedagogical function. To begin with, “when the slaves work for their means they are distracted from disobedience to Him, and from engaging their time in rebellion against Allah,” and, while such “preoccupation in means is a mercy of Allah,” this lack of contention with Allah can be a means to developing a greater trust in Allah (*tawakkul*) and exhibiting better *adab*.<sup>61</sup> Thus, anxiety over *rizq* can be a means, if correctly understood, towards affirming the primacy of Allah.

Yet, the existence of anxiety over *rizq* is evidence that knowledge of *tawhid* is lacking. Despite the existence of a means of livelihood, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is definite, writing that

*the final word is: means exist (wujud) for you, and you must be absent from them in your witnessing (shuhud). So confirm it in the same way His wisdom confirmed it, but do not lean on it for supports, because of your knowledge of His Oneness*<sup>62</sup>

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be encouraging the acknowledgment of a means of livelihood for it is acknowledging Allah’s mercy (*rahma*) to creation, which helps remove anxiety over *rizq*. Yet, he is indicating that such acknowledgement is not an end-in-itself and is not to be used as a crutch. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be considered as stating that anxiety over *rizq* can be a means towards affirming “His Oneness,” but utilising the existence of a means of livelihood to reduce anxiety over *rizq* indicates a lack of knowledge of the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

## ***Seeking from Allah***

While discussing the etiquette of asking from Allah, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah returns to the topic of maintaining servitude (*‘ubudiyyah*). His view is that making a request from Allah is not a sign of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 136.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 138.

distrust in His providing for creation, though this view can be seen laden with conditions. He writes that “asking and requesting from Allah does not oppose the station of pure servitude.”<sup>63</sup> The reasons behind this view are that a) asking is enjoined upon the slave, for he states “when He loosens your tongue with a request, then know that He wants to give you something”<sup>64</sup> for “God is most kind unto His creatures” (42: 19), and thus it is acting in accordance with ‘*ubudiyyah* and b) asking is a sign of need, meaning ontological poverty, which turns the individual towards Allah. However, this presupposes the satisfaction and acceptance of the manner in which Allah fulfils such requirements, for if not accompanied by acceptance of, and trust in, Allah the existence of need can be misunderstood. Furthermore, implicit in this view is that the individual has a sufficient understanding of the metaphysics of *tawhid* such that they are unable to “stretch out your hand to take from creatures unless you see that the Giver (*al-Mu’ti*) amongst them is your Lord.”<sup>65</sup>

Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is careful in delimiting the process and etiquette of seeking from Allah. He writes that

*being polite in seeking is that one seek from Allah and not specify an amount, or cause, or moment, so that the Real provides for him whatever He will, in the manner He wills, and at the moment He wills.*<sup>66</sup>

Among the reasons for omitting these specifics is to avoid the potential pitfalls. For if these specifics are omitted from a request then the likelihood of dissatisfaction and distrust is diminished. He writes that “any doubt in Divine provision constitutes doubt in the Provider.”<sup>67</sup> These doubts are liable to result in a perceived independence from Allah, of being ‘outside’ of Allah’s care. While indicating a lack of both knowledge and embodiment of *tawhid*, such views ignore the Qur’anic passage that states “there is no living creature on earth but depends for its sustenance on God” (11: 6), which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah takes to mean “trust in Me as a Guarantor, and take me as a trustworthy disposer of affairs.”<sup>68</sup> It is possible to see here Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 121.

soteriological semiotics in that the method of asking from Allah and the response to that which is received demarcates the relationship between each particular creation and their Creator.

## ***Adab and Soteriology***

*Adab* can now be seen to be a central soteriological process. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological semiotics is deployed so that each individual can ‘read’ the signs (*ayat*) given to them so that they can enact the correct response to each situation. Key to this understanding of *adab* is the ability to comprehend the signs (*ayat*) so that correct comportment can be displayed. This ‘reading’ is preliminary to soteriological development. Regarding this he states that “that which hearts find in the way of worries and sadnesses is due to that which prevents their having inner vision (*al-‘iyan*).”<sup>69</sup> “Worries and sadnesses” arise due to a lack of “inner vision (*al-‘iyan*),” for if inner vision was present then it would be seen that “the existence of the veil is the cause of suffering” and that “while varied in its manifestations, suffering (*al’adhab*) is due only to the existence of His veil.”<sup>70</sup> Knowing this opens up the possibility of examining the way in which creation is veiled from Allah, for a veil, by its nature, reveals aspects of what is veiled. By contemplating the manner in which Allah reveals Himself to creation through His veils, rather than being preoccupied with these veils as ends-in-themselves, opens the possibility of inner vision and, by seeing the veils for what they are, decreases worries and sadnesses.

Regarding the discussion of veils, there is an important point regarding the use of language, one that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is explicit about. He asks rhetorically “how can it be conceived that something veils Him, since He is the one who manifests everything (*azhara kulla shay’*)?” and again “how can it be conceived that something veils Him, since He is the One (*al-Wahid*) alongside of whom there is nothing?”<sup>71</sup> On this he has stated

*The Real (al-Haqq) is not veiled from you. Rather, it is you who are veiled from seeing It, for, were anything to veil It, then that which veils It would cover It. But if there were a covering to It, then that would be a limitation of*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 55.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 25 – 26.

*Its Being: every limitation of anything has power over it. "And He is the Omnipotent, above His servants."*<sup>72</sup>

Ibn 'Ata' Allah is careful to point out that Allah is not veiled from creation, as the Qur'an states "We are closer to him than his neck-vein" (50: 16), rather creation is veiled from Allah. This point touches on many domains. It is a metaphysical issue with regard to *tawhid*, while being an ontological issue with regard to any real distance between Creator and creation, and an epistemological issue with regard to the perception of such distance. Furthermore, it is also an issue of *adab* in that it involves the manner in which creation relates to Allah. It is in this light that his saying "do not deem His giving to be slow; but rather, deem your approaching to be slow"<sup>73</sup> can be understood. It is not that Allah is absent, for this would be contrary to the metaphysics of *tawhid*. Rather the extent to which the contingent is ignorant of Allah's presence is the perceived distance between the creation and Creator. Thus, the correct *adab* is for creation to censure themselves and "deem your approaching to be slow" for Allah is ever present.

Thus, the problem of *rizq* can be seen to exist, not because the acquisition of *rizq* is an issue. Rather, the problem of *rizq* exists because of the pedagogical ramifications of the existence of such a problem. The development of correct *adab*, both towards Allah and creation, ensures, through the performative process it engenders, that the correct comportment of the metaphysics of *tawhid* is embodied. Correct *adab* ensures that the virtues necessary for resolving the problem of *rizq* are enacted, allowing the individual to realise that the problem of *rizq* exists for its soteriological implications.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 29, quoting the Qur'an (6: 18),

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 53.

## Chapter 9 – Soteriology

If the preceding chapters can be considered as describing the stages of descent from essence (*dhat*) to creation (*kawn*), then this chapter should be considered as demarcating the ascent of the individual towards embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*. If the epistemic domain is the site of the solution to the problem of *rizq*, then the soteriological domain is the domain wherein the problem of *rizq* is resolved through enacting the metaphysics of *tawhid*. As the soteriological domain is the site wherein the individual's epistemic framework is actively brought into harmony with the metaphysics of *tawhid*, it is here that *tawhid* is affirmed, as this is the goal of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works. Drawing as it does on the prophetic example and the science of Prophethood (*ilm al-Nabuwah*), it has been seen that Islamic ethics generally, and Ibn 'Ata' Allah's specifically, has been seen to be an embodiment of *Muhammad rasul Allah*. Yet, as this mode of ethics is underpinned by the metaphysics of *tawhid*, it is in the soteriological domain that the purpose of ethical behaviour (*adab*) bears fruit. Thus, it is in this domain that the two halves of the *kalimah*, *la ilaha illa'llah* and *Muhammad rasul Allah*, can be seen to be united. As bearing witness to the *kalimah* is central to an Islamic paradigm,<sup>1</sup> achieving this unity between the two parts can be seen as the peak and purpose of Islamic soteriology.

### *The Problem and Goal of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's Soteriology*

One of the main problems that Islamic soteriology seeks to address is the abolition of idols. Central to this is the affirmation of *tawhid* in as far as it precludes all forms of associationism (*shirk*). Whilst it is a central and unifying theme within his work, it is not unique to Ibn 'Ata' Allah. The Qur'an shows the abolition of associationism as being trans-historical problem, one that occurs throughout the history of humanity and one that focuses on the individual's struggle against all forms of idols. In its most externalised form it involves abolishing the worship of physical object, as in the case of Prophet Abraham's statement "By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols" (21: 57). However, while this form of associationism (*shirk*) may persist, the form of idol worship that requires the most confrontation is its internalised form. It is these internalised idols that Ibn 'Ata' Allah can be seen as attempting to topple, as he states "Abraham, upon him be peace, came upon physical

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<sup>1</sup> As it is the first, and primary, pillar of Islam.



idols and shattered them” though “you have spiritual idols,” which he demarcates as being “specifically, you have five idols: the ego, craving, Satan, carnal appetite, and this earthly existence.”<sup>2</sup> Each of these distorts the epistemic outlook of the individual by positing an irreconcilable disjunction between Allah’s inherent Unicity and the perception of multiplicity.

In entering upon Islam the goal of affirming *tawhid* is set as a prerequisite, though the problem of reconciling Allah’s Unicity with the apparent multiplicity remains. While there is debate as to what Allah requires of humanity, within Islam there is an agreement that this involves affirming *tawhid*. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as was seen in the discussion on the metaphysics of *tawhid*, it is of the utmost importance to correctly understand *tawhid* and its implications so that a worldview that is consistent with it may be developed. What such a worldview would consist of has been explored in the previous chapters. While the goal is agreed upon, there is some disagreement upon what this entails for the individual. Much of the anti-Ibn ‘Arabi polemic can be seen as a reaction to this point.<sup>3</sup> So too can the alleged debate between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya be seen as an argument over the implications of *tawhid* upon the individual.<sup>4</sup> Debates such as these have often escalated to include accusations of antinomianism and apostasy. Though, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, these can be seen to result from conflating the ontological and epistemological domains.

While destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) play a role in the soteriological development of the individual, the individual should be cautioned against emphasising their role. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah would agree with those who are seen to be his detractors that an overreliance on destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) can result in antinominalistic tendencies. Though rather than disempowering the individual, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works can be seen to empower the individual by embracing destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada’*) in such a way that the inevitability of events is a means of detaching the individual from reliance on creation, which results in a turning to Allah. The result of this is, rather than an abolition of the law (*Shari’a*), an embodiment of it due to the awareness that, being within the domain of cause and effect, knowledge of future events, especially the ultimate outcome of the individual, remains for each contingent creation unknown. The law (*Shari’a*), and especially the Sunna, are actively maintained in as far as they

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<sup>2</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 273.

<sup>3</sup> See Knysh, *Later Islamic Tradition*.

<sup>4</sup> See Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine*, 367 – 379. See also chapter 10 below.

allow the individual to navigate within the domain of multiplicity whilst affirming *tawhid*. In participating in the world, and without actively seeking difficulties, the individual who is attempting to establish a God-centred consciousness can, with an understanding of destiny (*qadar*) and decree (*qada'*), reflect on their circumstances so as to see what Allah requires of them and the reasons for their current situation without relinquishing hope. This encourages the individual to develop contentment (*rida*), see below. As a result, there does not appear to be a world denying attitude that is apparent in other mystical or ascetic traditions, though this affirmation of the world is not done for its own sake.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, soteriological development seems particularly incumbent upon each individual due to the nobility given solely to the human amongst creation. While it has been previously seen that humans were created for worship, he cites the verse of Qur'an which states that "He has made subservient to you, [as a gift] from Himself, all that is in the heavens and the earth" (45: 13). He also mentions that he heard Abu'l 'Abbas say "Allah said: 'O son of Adam, I created all things for your sake, and I created you for Me, so do not become distracted with what is created for you from Him Whom you are created for.'" <sup>5</sup> On this Ibn 'Ata' Allah comments that "the nobility of the human over other than him among the creatures is the fact that the creatures are created for his sake, and he is created for the Presence of Allah," <sup>6</sup> from which it can be seen that the purpose of creation is to aid in embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

However, for the majority it is unclear how creation aids in embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*. For this it becomes necessary to develop a hermeneutic tool which allows the individual to be able to read the signs (*ayat*) as the Qur'an states: "We shall make them fully understand Our messages (*ayat*) [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth" (41: 53). Within this verse it can be seen that "the Koran refers to all things as 'signs' (*ayat*) of God, which is to say that Koranically, the meaning of things is determined by the mode in which they signify the God" <sup>7</sup> and that "the Divine Speech guides through its 'signs' (*ayat*) or verses, just as the cosmos – which is also the Speech of God, articulated within the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 122.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>7</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 3.

‘Breath of the All-merciful’ – gives news of God through its signs, which are the phenomena of nature.”<sup>8</sup> In order for individuals to be able to read the signs (*ayat*) on the horizons and within themselves Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah displays and encourages the development of what is here being termed a soteriological semiotics. It is a study of semiotics in that it examines creation in such a way as to determine “the mode in which they signify the God” and it is soteriological in that this study of symbols aims to bring about the perception and embodiment of the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

As Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s goal is to lead people to a correct understanding of Allah’s signs, he does not explicitly discuss those individuals who fail to reach the soteriological goal. There are two possible ways that an individual can fall short of consciously embodying *tawhid* either a) they are attempting to and die before it is achieved or b) they do not even attempt any sort of soteriological development. Of these two cases, the condition of the latter is easier to assess for the Qur’an states

*Say: “Shall we tell you who are the greatest losers in whatever they may do? [It is] they whose labour has gone astray in [the pursuit of no more than] this world’s life, and who none the less think that they are doing good works; it is they who have chosen to deny their Sustainer’s messages (ayat) and the truth that they are destined to meet Him.” Hence all their [good] deeds come to nought, and no weight shall We assign them on resurrection Day. (18: 103 – 105)*

The literal meaning of this Qur’anic verse is clear in stating that those who do not attempt to develop a soteriological semiotics by denying “their Sustainer’s messages (*ayat*)” will have to contend with it in the hereafter. The case of those who fall short in their soteriological development is not so clear. That these people do not “deny their Sustainer’s messages (*ayat*)” then their condition is different from the former group. Given Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s focus on Allah’s attributes of mercy it is conceivable that he would quote the Hadith that “the reward of deeds depends upon the intentions,”<sup>9</sup> which would increase the possibility that people in this condition would be included amongst “those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds – the gardens of paradise will be there to welcome them” (18: 107). However, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah would

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<sup>8</sup> Chittick, *Sufi Path*, XV.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, # 1.

be cautious to add 'Allah knows' (*Allahu 'alam*) for theirs is a condition that cannot be reasonably known about.

### ***Signs (ayat) in the Qur'an***

The Qur'an provides insight into the semiotic schemata by repeatedly mentioning Allah's signs (*ayat*). The Qur'an states that "among His signs" are "the night and the day, as well as the sun and the moon: [hence,] adore not the sun or the moon, but prostrate yourselves in adoration before God, who has created them - if it is Him whom you [really] worship" (41: 37), the "creation of the heavens and the earth, and of all the living creatures which He has caused to multiply throughout them" (42: 29), "the ships that sail like [floating] mountains through the seas" (42: 32), and "how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless" (30: 50). The highlighting of "His signs" is not arbitrary for "never did We send those signs for any other purpose than to convey a warning" (17: 59). However, these signs (*ayat*) are not always readily apparent and require the exercise and development of faculties latent within the human being for the Qur'an states that "We have made all the signs manifest unto people who are endowed with inner certainty" (2: 118), "We have indeed made the signs [thereof] clear unto you, if you would but use your reason" (3: 118), and that "on earth there are signs [of God's existence, visible] to all who are endowed with inner certainty" (51:20). The necessity for developing a soteriological semiotics is evident in the verse which states that "verily, in all this there are messages indeed for those who can read the signs" (15:75). Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that "created entities are the mirrors of the [divine] attributes,"<sup>10</sup> thus, it could be said that "the signs (*ayat*) of God" are "those manifestations of the divine reality that make up the cosmos."<sup>11</sup> By understanding these signs it becomes possible to affirm unity (*tawhid*) through multiplicity.

It could be said that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's task, at least as far as his writings are concerned, is to develop the individual's potential to be amongst "those who can read the signs." For this Ibn 'Ata' Allah enjoins on his readers to reflect upon the Qur'an. The reason for this is twofold, a) in as far as it is composed of verses (*ayat*), it is to be considered the book of signs (*ayat*) and b) the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> William C. Chittick, "Spectrums of Islamic Thought: Sa'id al-Din Farghani on the Implications of Oneness and Manyness," in *The Heritage of Sufism: The Legacy of Persian Sufism (1150 – 1500)*, ed. Lenard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 212.

symbolic interplay is, at times, more overt than within creation.<sup>12</sup> To begin with, when reciting the Qur'an, Ibn 'Ata' Allah enjoins the individual to "consider in you recitation what qualities and attributes God praises therein, the ones with which He describes those servants of His whom He loves ... and see what God Most High reproves in the Qur'an" for "God Most High did not mention them to you ... except to have you act accordingly."<sup>13</sup> Whilst this instruction involves reflection on that which explicitly meets with Allah's approval/disproval, it provides an entry point to further reflection upon the symbolic content of the Qur'an. He cites specific examples of this as including those "who, whenever they are moved to anger, readily forgive" (42: 37) and whom later may reach the point where they "hold in check their anger" (3: 134).<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that this reflection is not simply idle, for in acting accordingly Ibn 'Ata' Allah is reiterating that "the purpose of knowledge is action."<sup>15</sup> In order to enact such knowledge it is useful to remember that Muhammad was described as a "walking Qur'an" for a) it highlights a clear example of where the knowledge in the Qur'an has been put into action and b) it provides a resource or model of how creation, with their inherent ontological contingency, through action, come to embody the metaphysics of *tawhid*, as the Qur'an states "in the Apostle of God you have a good example" (33: 21).

### ***Signs (ayat) upon the horizons and within themselves***

The ability to read Allah's signs has a singular end. The Qur'an states that "in time We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth" (41: 53). Furthermore, the Qur'an states that "anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shall know that] verily, these [symbols derive their value] from the God-consciousness in the [believers'] hearts" (22:32). The challenge of developing a soteriological semiotics is in correctly honouring, or interpreting, "the symbols set up by God"

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<sup>12</sup> Regarding these two points Chittick, *Sufi Path*, XV, writes that "the revealed, written Speech can be more readily understood than the revealed, cosmic Speech" and for this reason "it provides the key through which 'opening' can take place – the opening of the door to comprehension of the signs within the macrocosm and microcosm, the universe around us and within us."

<sup>13</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 115.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 44 – 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 23. See Chapter 6 above.

for once this is achieved “it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.” In grappling with this issue, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah asks “how can created entities bring about the knowledge of Him when He is the One who has brought about knowledge of them?”<sup>16</sup>

The challenge of correctly interpreting the signs of Allah is further complicated given the metaphysics of *tawhid*. Everything is a sign of Allah for “He appears even in those entities through which He is veiled.”<sup>17</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah comments on this, stating that “the truth has thus been veiled from His servants by the very magnificence of His appearance, while their sight has been prevented from witnessing Him by the very brilliance of His light.”<sup>18</sup> In order to resolve this issue it is useful to bracket off the various domains, as has been done here, even though such bracketing is artificial. Ontologically each creation is a sign of Allah, though it is only through the epistemic outlook of the individual that the semiotic value of said creation is determined. Furthermore, the soteriological development of the individual may foreground particular signs (*ayat*), at the expense of others, in order to highlight certain areas of development.

### ***Soteriological Development***

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as humans were created noble, each individual has the potential for regaining their nobility. Commenting on the Qur’anic verse “We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above most of Our creation” (17: 70), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “the substance of man was originally created noble and honourable” and “as there was honour in the original prototype, then man’s being purified is in accordance with his prototype, while his being defiled is in opposition to his original prototype.”<sup>19</sup> On this the Qur’an states “We create man in the best conformation, and thereafter We reduce him to the lowest of the low” (95: 4 – 5). While this can be read as a cosmological description of creation’s descent (*tanazzul*), soteriologically it shows a) that the human’s inherent disposition is “in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 158.

best conformation” and b) that, for the generality, this conformation has been, temporally, lost as they are “the lowest of the low.” That the soteriological goal is to regain “the best conformation” becomes apparent in the verse directly following, which states “excepting only such as attain to faith and do good works: and theirs shall be a reward unending” (95: 6). “Faith” can be understood as affirming *la ilaha illa’llah* and “good works” would be those that are consistent with one’s faith and as such would follow the prophetic example.

The process of attaining to faith and doing good works, for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, means affirming *tawhid*. Quoting the verse “those who ascribe divinity to aught besides God are nothing but impure” (9: 28), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “impurity is in opposition to the prototype, and his being who affirms the Oneness of God necessitates purity to begin with, because he is in conformity with the prototype.”<sup>20</sup> This is further confirmed in his statements that “amongst the signs of success at the end is the turning to God at the beginning” and “He who is illumined at the beginning is illumined at the end.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the process of soteriological development involves affirming the Oneness of Allah through embodying the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

Without the individual’s adherence to the law (*Shari’a*) wavering, its pedagogical function means that the relationship to the law (*Shari’a*) changes with soteriological development. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah writes that each individual

*must not practice dissimulation but must observe the code of conduct of the Law, both in its minor and major points, if he knows them. If he does not know them, then with respect to every situation in which he finds himself, he asks, ‘What does the Law prescribe therein?’ Whosoever betrays the code of the Law is more likely to betray the divine secrets. God Most High only bestows His secrets on the trustworthy.*<sup>22</sup>

In the beginning, adherence to the law (*Shari’a*) aids in curbing the ego’s inclinations. This, in turn, moves to manifesting good actions, namely those prescribed by the law, and abstaining from bad actions. Once the ego’s inclinations have been curbed, it becomes possible to realise that adherence to the law (*Shari’a*) is an affirmation of *tawhid*. This is partly because, as Abu’l

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 126.

Hassan states, “the Qur’an and Sunna is guaranteed by God Most High”<sup>23</sup> and in adhering to the Divine law the individual curbs to the point of effacing the ego’s inclinations in preference to a God-centred consciousness.

### ***The Soteriological Function of Knowledge***

As mentioned in chapter 3, the metaphysics of *tawhid* requires a radically different epistemological framework than that normally utilised in engaging with creation. This is because it is founded on Allah’s Unity, rather than treating the multiplicity of creation as fundamental. From this it is apparent that knowledge is crucial for soteriological development. While it has been mentioned that “the purpose of knowledge is action,”<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah further states that “when knowledge (*‘ilm*) is mentioned in the Qur’an or in the statements of the Messenger of God, it refers to that knowledge which is beneficial, which suppresses passionate craving, and suppresses [earthly desires], and which is attended by reverent fear and repentance.”<sup>25</sup> The kind of knowledge that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah sees being referred to is that which lessens a self-centred consciousness so that it can be replaced with a God-centred consciousness, for “God’s path is far from discord and from the manifestations of the ego’s inclinations.”<sup>26</sup> In support of this point he quotes the verse “of all His servants, only such as are endowed with knowledge stand [truly] in awe of God” (35: 28), indicating the intimate connection between servanthood (*‘ubudiyyah*) and being “endowed with knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> Knowledge is transformative in as far as its acquisition affects the individual’s interaction with creation and because it has the potential to affect it is soteriological.

For soteriological development, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be advocating a radical re-orientation of the epistemological framework. The affirmation and embodiment of *tawhid*,

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<sup>23</sup> Al-Sha’rani quoted by Lory, “al-Shadhili,” 171.

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 22.



which is central to soteriological development, requires an epistemological, rather than ontological, shift for

*Your union with God is union through knowledge of Him (al-'ilmu bihi).  
Otherwise, God is beyond being united with anything or anything being  
united with Him.*<sup>28</sup>

The importance of this statement cannot be underestimated as it cuts to the centre of the anti-Sufi polemic and undermines one of the main accusations levelled against the Sufis, namely the accusation of unity with Allah (*ittihad*), used in attempts to illustrate Sufism's supposedly heterodox views. Without denying that claims of unity (*ittihad*) have abounded within the history of Islam, it is clear from Ibn 'Ata' Allah's statement that claims of ontological unity are not consistent with the metaphysics of *tawhid* and are therefore invalid. Ibn 'Ata' Allah undermines any accusation of ontological unity with Allah (*ittihad*) by indicating that it is only through an epistemological shift, "through knowledge of Him (*al-'ilmu bihi*)," that an individual can willingly integrate the metaphysics of *tawhid* into their ontological contingency.

### ***Arriving at the Qualities of the faqir***

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, realising the metaphysics of *tawhid* can be simply stated. Succinctly stated, the soteriological process and goal is to "cling to the attributes of His Lordship and realise the attributes of your servanthood."<sup>29</sup> In unpacking this statement it becomes apparent that an aspect of realising servanthood (*'ubudiyyah*) involves a conscious awareness of creation's inherent ontological poverty, for which the company of the *faqir*, as was mentioned previously, is indispensable.

While Ibn 'Ata' Allah is not alone in indicating that there are two paths to Allah, his intention of, and reasons for, focusing on one rather than the other is clear. These two paths are those of the spiritual wayfarers (*al-salikin*) and the divinely possessed (*al-majdhubin*). The former type is categorised by "the saint who has allied himself with God"<sup>30</sup> and "comes about through sincere

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<sup>28</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 41.

effort for God and loyalty to Him in pursuit of His reward.”<sup>31</sup> The latter is categorised by “the saint with whom God has allied Himself”<sup>32</sup> and “comes about through annihilation to everything other than God, while remaining present in everything through God.”<sup>33</sup> As the divinely possessed (*al-majdhubin*) are taken by Allah, rather than arriving at Allah through work, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “the first might be thought of as a lesser sainthood, as it were, and the second, as a greater sainthood,”<sup>34</sup> though “this is an imperfection, because God, may He be praised, only revealed the kingdom in order that He might be seen therein” such that “if someone is absent to the created universe, he will likewise be absent to the vision of the Truth therein.”<sup>35</sup> According to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, to be annihilated to everything other than Allah is to miss the soteriological function of creations for “created entities were not set up in order for you to see them, but rather, in order for you to see their Master within them” such that “if someone is absent to the created universe, he will likewise be absent to the vision of Truth therein.”<sup>36</sup> On this point the Qur’an, in stating “for, all who ally themselves with God and His Apostle and those who have attained to faith - behold, it is they, the partisans of God, who shall be victorious” (5: 56), can be seen to affirm the view each individual allying themselves with Allah and achieving nearness through consistent efforts at attaining to faith is the higher of the two paths to Allah.

For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, soteriological development involves adherence to a definite and established order. He encourages his readers “engage in spiritual discipline, namely, in refining moral character, in avoiding levity, and in bearing wrong” for “it is rare that any good fortune can come from him whose illumination precedes his spiritual discipline.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, soteriological development involves a rigorous process that is intimately connected with the development of good moral character (*adab*). Commenting on what it means for those “who ally themselves with God” (5: 56), Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “your alliance with God emerges from spiritual

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 104.

warfare, your alliance with His Apostle emerges from your emulation of his Sunnah, and your alliance with those who believe emerges from your imitations of the imams.”<sup>38</sup> From this it can be seen that alliance with Allah requires moving from a self-centred consciousness to a God-centred consciousness which is evident in the Prophetic example and is achieved through adherence to the Prophetic example, as can be seen in those most knowledgeable of the Prophetic example. From another perspective, with regard to the divinely possessed (*al-majdhubin*), being annihilated “to everything other than God,”<sup>39</sup> it is considered “rare that any good fortune can come from him whose illumination precedes his spiritual discipline”<sup>40</sup> because they do not fulfil the obligations of creation in that they are “absent to the created universe.”<sup>41</sup>

Whilst it is necessary to struggle in order to achieve soteriological development, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah indicates that it is not as a result of the individual’s struggle that soteriological development occurs. He states,

*If you were to be united with Him only after the extinction of your vices and the effacement of your pretensions, you would never be united with Him. Instead, when He wants to unite you to Himself, He covers your attribute (wasf) with His Attribute and hides your quality (na’t) with His Quality. And thus He unites you to Himself by virtue of what comes from Him to you, not by virtue of what goes from you to Him.*<sup>42</sup>

This statement can be taken to indicate that the ontological error of the perception of independence, being an aspect inherent in contingency, does not leave the individual. The perception that soteriological development is the result of the individual’s effort is false, as can be seen in the case with the divinely possessed (*al-majdhubin*), for it posits causative power with the individual who, as was previously stated, is ontologically poor. In order for the metaphysics of *tawhid* to be maintained throughout the process of soteriological development, the individual is required to adhere to an epistemic framework that maintains that any effort

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<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 42.

expended is bestowed on the individual by Allah as “He unites you to Himself by virtue of what comes from Him to you, not by virtue of what goes from you to Him.”<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is aware that this perceived ontological independence can result in an epistemological error that hinders soteriological development. He states that

*It is not the existence of any being alongside of Him (wujud mawjud ma’ah) that veils you from God, for nothing (la shay’a) is alongside of Him. Rather, the illusion of a being alongside of Him (tawahhum mawhud ma’ah) is what veils you from Him.*<sup>44</sup>

The faulty perception of Allah is not the result of an ontological entity but rather the attribution of existence to some such entity. The perception of ontological entities alongside of Allah’s ontic manifestation results from an epistemological error of apprehending the implications of the metaphysics of *tawhid*. In order to avoid perpetuating the soteriologically stagnant cycle of moving from creature to creature, like the above mentioned “donkey at the mill,”<sup>45</sup> it is necessary to deploy a soteriological semiotics that sees the Cosmos (*al-kawn*) “illuminated only by the manifestation of God (*zuhur al-Haqq*) in it.”<sup>46</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah this is a Qur’anic injunction, as he states

*He has permitted you to reflect on what is in created being but He has not allowed you to stop at the selfsame creatures. “Say: Behold what is in the heavens and the earth!” Thus, with His words “Behold what is in the heavens” He opened up the door of instruction to you. But He did not say, “Behold the heavens,” so as not to lead you to the mere existence of bodies.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 44. Quoting Qur’an 10: 101.

Thus, by advocating for an epistemology that is underpinned by the metaphysics of *tawhid*, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to deploy a method of apprehension that perpetuates soteriological development.

### ***Contentment (rida) and Soteriological Development***

In chapter six the necessity of showing contentment (*rida*) when faced with difficulty was seen. The kind of contentment (*rida*) discussed previously aimed at developing steadfastness through adversity and focused on events where the individual could not affect the outcome. Yet, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah raises the example of “a man [who] was sitting in the shade, and then the sun shone over the container he was drinking from, but he did not move it.”<sup>48</sup> His decision not to move it because he is “ashamed to follow my self’s desires by moving it to the shade,” while being indicative of “a servant who seeks truthfulness from his self” is not indicative of complete adherence of the Divine.<sup>49</sup> This state of contentment (*rida*) is being utilised in its soteriologically transformative aspect in that it enjoins steadfastness in opposing a self-centred consciousness. True contentment (*rida*) involves adhering to Allah’s injunctions, two of which Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah raises with regard to this example being “God wills that you shall have ease, and does not will you to suffer hardship” (2: 185) and “God wants to lighten your burdens: for man was created weak” (4: 28). Given this “had his station been perfected he would have lifted the water away from the sunlight, intending by that the fulfilment of the rights of the self, which Allah ordered to be fulfilled.”<sup>50</sup> This would be more in line with Moses actions, having watered a flock of animals “he withdrew into the shade and prayed: ‘O my Sustainer! Verily, in dire need am I of any good which Thou mayest bestow upon me’ (28: 24), for this indicates both fulfilling the rights of the self and displaying trust (*tawakkul*) and contentment (*rida*) with Allah’s choice of the good bestowed, which the individual has no choice in. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah relays this incident indicating the soteriological benefit of keeping the water cool:

*Shaykh Abu-l-Hasan said: “My Shaykh said, ‘My Son, cool the water. If you drink other than cold water you will say ‘praise be to Allah’ (Alhamdulillah) out of a sense of obligation but without feeling. But if you drink cool water*

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<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 102.

*and say 'praise be to Allah' each and every one of you organs will respond to the Benevolence of Allah with praise.*"<sup>51</sup>

Thus, in avoiding unnecessary hardship there is soteriological benefit for a) it affirms a Divine injunction, b) by being unburdened the individual's resolve for further soteriological development is not weakened, and c) it eases the development of contentment (*rida*) by satisfying the body with that which is pleasant.

### ***The Pedagogical Function of the Problem of Rizq***

Given what has been said of the problem of *rizq* in the preceding chapters, the existence of this problem makes sense when seen in light of soteriological development. The problem of *rizq* has been seen to arise within the ontological domain. Due to creation's inherent contingency, it is an epistemological problem that can be seen to result from the conflation of the metaphysical and ontological domains. The existence of this problem seems to be connected with changing the condition of the individual for the hereafter, which is achieved through correct comportment within the herenow. Whilst this is an aspect of the problem of *rizq*, given Ibn 'Ata' Allah's overarching concern, that of soteriological development, the preceding seems insufficient. If this was the case then the inhabitants of paradise would receive Allah's enduring provision and the inhabitants of hell would be deprived of it. Yet, given that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's view is that "deprivation (*al-man'*) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of God in it,"<sup>52</sup> in the case of the inhabitants of hell, they are receiving both the provision of hell and the provision of being deprived of inhabiting paradise.

Whilst *rizq* embraces all aspects of creation, at its highest levels it has a strictly soteriological function. Giving a sort of typology of *rizq* Ibn 'Ata' Allah writes that

*Sustenance of the outer man comes from the movements of the body;  
sustenance of the inner man comes from the movements of the heart;  
spiritual sustenance of one's most interior being is through tranquillity; and*

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 37.

*the sustenance of the intellect is through extinction of one's consciousness of tranquillity, so that the servant is tranquil for God and with God.*<sup>53</sup>

Whilst these can be seen as differing kinds of *rizq*, operating on different levels, they can also be seen as differing conceptions of *rizq* according to soteriological development. The individual's tranquillity "for God" can be seen to engage the ethical and epistemological domains in as far as doing something "for God" implies injunctions that a) are to be followed, hence are ethical injunctions and b) requires knowledge of why and for whom these injunctions are being carried out, hence a shift in the epistemological paradigm of the individual. The individual's tranquillity "with God" can be seen as covering the epistemological and ontological domains in that being "with God" implies a) knowledge of how the individual's mode of being can willingly reintegrate them in accord with Allah, thus involving an epistemological shift and b) the congruence of being "with" implies acceptance of creation's ontological disposition. This can be seen to culminate in the "extinction of one's consciousness" which draws the individual back to the metaphysical domain in that in accepting creation's ontological contingency results in a shift away from a self-centred consciousness to a focus on the metaphysics of *tawhid* and the development of a God-centred consciousness. Thus, in this short passage Ibn 'Ata' Allah describes a hierarchy through which the problem of *rizq* can take an individual in order that they may ultimately affirm the Unicity of Allah (*tawhid*).

### ***The Problem of rizq as a Sign (ayat)***

From the above discussion it is apparent that the existence of the problem of *rizq* is one of the signs of Allah. In being a sign (*ayat*) it functions to inform the individual of their relation with Allah and their affirmation and embodiment of *tawhid*. In affirming and embodying *tawhid* the individual must come to a position where they realise their complete dependence on Allah and defer from contesting with the Divine will through self-direction (*tadbir*) for "God grants sustenance unto whom He wills, beyond all reckoning" (2: 212). Provision, like all other aspects of creation, is a sign (*ayat*) indicative of the individual's relation with Allah and its bestowal, whether given or withheld, can be seen to come such that the individual is given the greatest possible potential of affirming *tawhid*. The lack of trust on Allah's bestowal of provision, due to a misunderstanding of the function of the problem of *rizq*, is easily recognised for "one of the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 51.

signs of relying on one's own deeds is the loss of hope when a downfall occurs."<sup>54</sup> Regarding this Ibn 'Ata' Allah can be considered to be expanding this point when he states that

*Know that the people of insight consider [self-direction] tadbir with Allah to be a form of contention with His Lordship. And that is because if He makes some undesirable affair descend upon you which you want lifted, or if He lifts away some desirable affair which you want Him to set down with you, or if you accuse Him of neglecting something you know He has taken charge of and established for you (like sustenance), then all that is considered contending with His Lordship, and leaving the reality of pure servanthood.*<sup>55</sup>

Thus, the existence of the problem of *rizq* is to act as a sign (*ayat*) which affirms creation's ontological poverty and inherent contingency. As a result, the problem of *rizq* can be seen to an entry point, for those who delve into it, into soteriological development.

### ***The Solution to the Problem of rizq***

At the opening of the *Lata'if al-Minan* Ibn 'Ata' Allah states "to God, exulted is He, do I turn for aid, upon Him do I rely ... God is our sufficiency."<sup>56</sup> In this statement two things are apparent, firstly, the key to the solution to the problem of *rizq*, secondly, evidence that Ibn 'Ata' Allah had solved this problem. In turning to, and relying on, Allah, Ibn 'Ata' Allah is echoing an opening verse of the Qur'an, "Thee alone do we worship; and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid" (1: 5). This verse is recited repeatedly throughout the day by Muslims everywhere. Yet, unless they are willing to undergo soteriological development, this verse will merely describe an unavoidable ontological condition. If the individual is to make this declaration along with the epistemological implications that it has, then the individual will have reached the point where they cannot but "stretch out your hand to take from creatures unless you see that the Giver (*al-Mu'ti*) amongst them is your Lord"<sup>57</sup> because "God is our sufficiency."<sup>58</sup> Allah is sufficient for the individual in as far as they are aware of Him.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 23.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Tanwir*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 50.



For the individual to find their epistemological sufficiency in Allah,<sup>59</sup> the individual is required to realise, know, and remember that what comes to them through creation ultimately comes to them from Allah. Regarding this, Ibn 'Ata' Allah states that "verily, the remembrance of God Most High is the key to salvation and the lamp of souls"<sup>60</sup> as remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) involves both the awareness of *tawhid* and creation's contingency. Furthermore, as *tawhid* and creation's contingency are constant irrespective of the individual's soteriological development, they cannot be ignored or forgotten. For this reason, "the remembrance of God is the foundation of the Path and the pivotal support of the realised sages."<sup>61</sup> As a result, the remembrance or invocation of Allah is necessary as "the invocation is the nourishment of the soul just as food is the nourishment of the body."<sup>62</sup> Invocation, or the practice of remembrance (*dhikr*), involves the process through which the individual comes to the constant awareness of their inherent contingency and Allah's Oneness, for "invoking polishes the heart of its rust, which is forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) and the pursuit of its passions."<sup>63</sup> Forgetfulness of creation's ontological poverty is a prime hurdle that is to be overcome in order for the affirmation and embodiment of *tawhid*.

That the individual was created to worship Allah alone is the means and goal of soteriological development. It is the means of soteriological development in that through a deepening sincerity of practice the individual embodies their inherent ontological contingency, which, in turn, makes possible the virtues discussed in the preceding chapters, such as trust, certainty, contentment, patient endurance, and obedience, amongst others. In attempting to bring about an epistemology that relegates creation to an ontological position consistent with the metaphysics of *tawhid*, the individual takes on a particular ethical comportment that, rather

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<sup>58</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> It is necessary to differentiate between the individual's ontological sufficiency, which due to the metaphysics of *tawhid*, comes from Allah without the option of another source, and the individual's epistemological sufficiency, which can either be directly Allah or indirectly Allah as the individual attempts to fulfil their existence with contingent things unaware that they have ultimately come from Allah.

<sup>60</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

than diminishing once established, increases to the point where they are said to have reached a stage of servanthood. Servanthood is marked by a greater degree of worship because the individual, in embodying *tawhid* both unwillingly, through their ontological existence, and willingly, through their epistemological realisation and acceptance of their existence, realises that “unto God do we belong and, verily, unto Him we shall return” (2: 156) and Allah alone will suffice for any and all needs.

The solution to the problem of *rizq* is for the individual to find their sufficiency in Allah. Due to the contingent nature of creatures, sufficiency cannot be found in creation, as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah recognises in stating “travel not from creature to creature, otherwise you will be like a donkey at the mill: roundabout he turn, his goal the same as his departure.”<sup>64</sup> The journey from creature to creature is never-ending and unfulfilling because “the Cosmos (*al-kawn*) is all darkness,”<sup>65</sup> however the individual is saved from remaining relegated to “the lowest of low” (95: 5) and can regain their potentiality of “the best conformation” (95: 4) solely because the Cosmos “is illumed only by the manifestation of God (*zuhur al-Haqq*) in it.”<sup>66</sup> Allah’s signs (*ayat*) within creation are not arbitrary, and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah advises that the individual “do[es] not look forward to being free from alterities (*al-aghyar*), for that is indeed what cuts you off from vigilant attention (*al-muraqaba*) to Him in that very state He has assigned to you.”<sup>67</sup> Nor is there a lack of provision, for “He does not give them sustenance except as a result of His knowledge that the state in which they are is not actually due to themselves” for “rather, it is due to God”<sup>68</sup> In “that very state He has assigned you” is all the provision (*rizq*) necessary for realising, affirming, and willingly embodying Allah’s Oneness (*tawhid*) and creation’s poverty (*faqr*). Thus, to say, along with Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, that “God is our sufficiency”<sup>69</sup> is to realise that the problem of *rizq* is only a problem in as far as the individual has yet to find their sufficiency with Allah.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Kitab al-Hikam*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 122.

<sup>69</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *Lata’if al-Minan*, 10.

## Chapter 10 - Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Islamic Orthodoxy

This work has thus far has attempted to elucidate Ibn 'Ata' Allah's worldview. In doing so his commitment to Islam has been highlighted through foregrounding his utilisation of the primary texts of Islamic orthodoxy, the Qur'an and the Hadith, and how indebted his work is to an Islamic paradigm. Another approach can be made to further support claims for Ibn 'Ata' Allah's orthodoxy. Given the emphasis that has been placed on Ibn 'Ata' Allah's supposed opposition to Ibn Taymiyya one could be led to believe that Ibn 'Ata' Allah held heterodox views, given Ibn Taymiyya's fervour for opposing what he saw to be heretical beliefs. However, this chapter will attempt to show that, far from being heterodox, Ibn 'Ata' Allah agrees with Ibn Taymiyya's opposition of such beliefs, as he too would consider them to be heretical. However, Ibn 'Ata' Allah does disagree with Ibn Taymiyya on who can be deemed to have held such beliefs. Given the view, held by many both historically and today, that Ibn Taymiyya is a champion of Islamic orthodoxy, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's support of such view would further strengthen claims of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Ibn Taymiyya are generally considered to be opponents. This position is based on the former's support and the latter's rebuttal of specific Sufi tenets. There is also the fact that Ibn 'Ata' Allah provided evidence which contributed indirectly to Ibn Taymiyya's imprisonment. Ibn 'Ata' Allah's supposed opposition to Ibn Taymiyya, more often than not, overshadows Ibn 'Ata' Allah's achievements. This chapter utilises the text of the alleged debate between these two, which is said to have occurred upon Ibn Taymiyya's release from prison, to foreground and assess Ibn 'Ata' Allah's position with regard to his relationship with Ibn Taymiyya. Irrespective of the historical authenticity of this debate, the text is important because it touches on several key issues within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's *oeuvre*.

This chapter has two main sections. The first surveys the modern scholarly literature, showing that it generally overstates Ibn 'Ata' Allah's opposition to Ibn Taymiyya. In re-examining their relationship, it becomes possible to see that, rather than having a strict opposition, their differences are due to different ontologies. The second utilises the key issues raised by Ibn

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<sup>1</sup> This in no way suggests that Ibn Taymiyya can be viewed as a paradigm of Islamic orthodoxy for criticisms of his works abound, though to detail them would take us too far afield and these accusations do not detract from the issues detailed here.

Taymiyya against the Sufis in the text of the debate. It will be seen that, rather than hitting his target, Ibn Taymiyya's accusations stem from an ontology foreign to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works. Crucial in highlighting their differences is the role given to the Unicity of Allah (*tawhid*). It will be shown that Ibn Taymiyya's criticisms elicit from a misunderstanding of the Sufi approach to *tawhid*, of which Ibn 'Ata' Allah is an advocate. Rather than dismissing Ibn Taymiyya's concerns, Ibn 'Ata' Allah agrees with his interlocutor that individuals who hold such views deserve to be rebuked as heterodox, however that such accusations need to be aimed correctly.

Without denying that they were opponents, this traditional reading maybe overly strong which imposes a limited and limiting interpretation on some of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's comments. While it is documented that Ibn 'Ata' Allah, amongst others, marched against Ibn Taymiyya,<sup>2</sup> this opposition has been taken further and read into the former's works. An example of this is Ibn 'Ata' Allah criticism of strictly exoteric interpretations of Islamic law. Without dismissing the possibility that Ibn Taymiyya is implied within these comments, it should be remembered that in his youth Ibn 'Ata' Allah was of the view that "beyond the letter of the Law there is nothing else to seek,"<sup>3</sup> that is, a strictly literal interpretation of Islamic doctrine. With this in mind, it is possible that Ibn 'Ata' Allah, in his comments cautioning his readers against the "shallow-minded doctors of Islamic exoterism,"<sup>4</sup> is referring to the folly of his youth, as well as those inclined towards such views and particular figures whose interpretation he disagrees with. The limited and limiting interpretation of this phrase alone gives good reason to delve into and re-examine the relationship and debate between these two figures.

### ***The Opposition between Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Ibn Taymiyya***

Of the events of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's life, those surrounding the trial, imprisonment, and subsequent release of Ibn Taymiyya all but obscure the other aspects of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's life. It has been stated that "the most remarkable event in his [Ibn 'Ata' Allah's] life was his

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<sup>2</sup> Makdisi, "Ibn 'Ata' Allah," 723; Henri Laoust, "Ibn Taymiyya," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), vol. III, 952; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

confrontation with the Hanbali theologian and jurist Ibn Taymiyya.”<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is “conventionally regarded as having been doctrinally opposed to Ibn Taymiyya, in much the same way as Ibn Taymiyya is usually regarded as having disapproved of Sufism and the Sufis” with “the best-known conventional accounts [giving] scant indication that this view might be questioned.”<sup>6</sup> He has been called “one of the foremost adversaries of the Hanbali jurist and theologian,”<sup>7</sup> “one of the most vigorous opponents of Ibn Taymiyya,”<sup>8</sup> and is considered to be “among the most vociferous critics of Ibn Taymiyya.”<sup>9</sup> It is said that Ibn Taymiyya’s “very first *fatwa* at Cairo, which was directed against the cult of the saints, earned him the enduring hostility of two personages, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah al-Iskandari (d. 709 AH) and Karim ad-Din al-Amuli”<sup>10</sup> and that Ibn Taymiyya was “attacked by the Alexandrian [Ibn] ‘Ata’ Allah al-Iskandari ... one of al-Shadhili’s fervent disciples.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, assertions that “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah made a lasting contribution to the consolidation and expansion of the Shadhiliyya *tariqa* by the leading role he played in defending Sufi beliefs against their detractors” and that “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah made a name for himself as an articulate and determined defender of Sufi beliefs against these attacks [by Ibn Taymiyya]”<sup>12</sup> all but ignores all other achievements of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. Such comments seem to make Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah a footnote in the life of Ibn Taymiyya, despite the fact that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is rarely mentioned in the literature regarding the latter. They further overlook the fact that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s march against Ibn Taymiyya occurred during one of the last few years of his life, obscuring all earlier achievements, amongst which is the composition of the *Kitab al-Hikam*, which was completed during the life of his Shaykh and has, since its composition, been widely held in high regard.

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<sup>5</sup> Sambur, “Prayer in the Psychology,” 196.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>7</sup> Makdisi, “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah,” 722.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Brockelmann, “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah,” in *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 147.

<sup>9</sup> John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 115 – 16.

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad U. Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 341 n.152.

<sup>12</sup> Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 110. This view is partially supported by Austin, “Counsels,” 207, who states that the *Qasid al-mujarrad* was written “partly in answer to Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on the practice of *dhikr* or the invocation of the divine Name.”

One of the main events used to support Ibn 'Ata' Allah's opposition to Ibn Taymiyya is his being at the head of a march in protest against the latter. He is known to have supported the charges that led to the latter's arrest in 707 AH/1308 CE<sup>13</sup> and was "at the head of a vast stream of hundreds of *fuqara* and *Shaykhs* ... [who] confronted Ibn Taymiyya under the watchful eyes of the religious authorities."<sup>14</sup> Another account states that "a crowd of over 500 commoners (*al-'amma*) joined Ibn 'Ata' Allah and the master of the Sufi *khanqah* of Sa'id as Su'ada in their march to the Citadel ... to protest against Ibn Taymiyya."<sup>15</sup> The historian Ibn Kathir reported that "in the presence of the authorities (*al-dawla*) ... Ibn 'Ata' [Allah al-Sikandari] made a number of accusations against [Ibn Taymiyya], none of which was proven."<sup>16</sup> However, contemporary accounts of their opposition are often too simplistic despite a lack of historical evidence. In considering the content and tone of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, it appears implausible that words as strong as "adversary"<sup>17</sup> or "vociferous critic"<sup>18</sup> can be applied unquestioningly.

Furthermore, the text of their alleged debate, as it stands,<sup>19</sup> presents its own difficulties.<sup>20</sup> One of these issues is that "Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Ibn Taymiyya are too polite,"<sup>21</sup> so much so that it is with reluctance that the text of their alleged encounter is referred to as a debate in the

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<sup>13</sup> Makdisi, "Ibn 'Ata' Allah," 722 – 23.

<sup>14</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Kathir in Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Makdisi, "Ibn 'Ata' Allah," 722.

<sup>18</sup> Renard, *Dictionary of Sufism*, 116.

<sup>19</sup> Translated in Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine*, 367 – 79.

<sup>20</sup> There are dramatically opposing positions regarding this text. Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, 108, writes that "the origin of this dialogue remains something of a problem" due to a lack of "reference to it in any of the histories or biographical works of the period," while Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine*, 367, introduces the text as "a historical debate which took place between the two." A further issue is that Johansen's, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, 113, discussion of the text hints that there is more to the dialogue than is translated in Kabbani, namely than beyond where this translation finishes there is a section where Ibn 'Ata' Allah suggests that the two "busy ourselves with matters which are more to the general benefit of the community" and he advises "that is the Sultan were to return to power ... [for] Ibn Taymiyya to go to him in the capacity of an adviser," though this does not detract from the issues raised here.

<sup>21</sup> Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, 108.

conventional sense. Also, it would not be a stretch to make a case that Ibn Taymiyya is little more than a trope, though there are other possible explanations for his curt replies. If, as the text makes out, this conversation occurred almost immediately after Ibn Taymiyya was pardoned and released from prison, one would expect the supposed antagonism to be evident. If the rivalry was rife, as reported, one would expect that they denounce each other rather than acknowledging that “the difference between them is no more than a question of approach and interpretation.”<sup>22</sup> Another issue regarding this encounter is that Ibn Taymiyya supposedly arrived “back in Cairo on 8 Shawwal 709 AH/11 March 1310 CE”<sup>23</sup> while Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is considered to have died “in the middle of Jumada II 709 AH/November 1309 CE,”<sup>24</sup> making it impossible that their debate occurred upon Ibn Taymiyya’s release and return to Cairo if these dates are correct. Yet, despite these issues, the text of their debate is useful in that it covers many of the key points of difference between these two scholars.

### ***Ibn Taymiyya’s Charges against the Sufis***

Ibn Taymiyya’s charges against the Sufis that take precedence within the debate with Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah fall into three categories, antinomianism, calling for help (*istighatha*) and seeking a means (*tawassul*) other than Allah, and the ideas that individuals can indwell in Allah (*hulul*) and attain unity with Allah (*ittihad*). The charge of antinomianism arises as a result of Ibn Taymiyya’s other charges. *Istighatha* and *tawwasul* relate to the affirmation of Allah’s unicity (*tawhid*) and accusations of associationism (*shirk*). These two are grouped together because within the debate Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah states that “*istighatha* or calling for help is the same as *tawassul* or seeking a means and asking for intercession (*shifa’a*)” and both he and Ibn Taymiyya agree that it is “the Messenger, on him be peace, [who] is the one whose help is sought since he is our means and he is the one whose intercession we seek.”<sup>25</sup> *Hulul* and *ittihad*, while related to *tawhid* and *shirk*, depend upon differing conceptions of *tawhid* to those advocated for by Ibn Taymiyya. While *hulul* has several connotations, the kind that Ibn Taymiyya can be seen to be

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>23</sup> Laoust, “Ibn Taymiyya,” 952. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle*, 57, confirms that Ibn Taymiyya was released from prison “on March 4, 1310” CE.

<sup>24</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 9. Brockelmann, “Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah,” 147, cites the date of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s death as the “16<sup>th</sup> Djumada II 709 AH/ 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1309 CE.”

<sup>25</sup> Kabbani, *Islamic Belief & Doctrine*, 369.

arguing against is “any doctrine which upholds the idea of Divine incarnation in human form”<sup>26</sup> for this would mean, amongst other things, that a) there are two eternals, namely “God and the receptive object,” and b) “God would become divisible through the division of the receptive object.”<sup>27</sup> Amongst the different ways *ittihad* is understood, the sense in which it is rejected by Ibn Taymiyya is that “a thing becomes another while remaining itself” such that “it can be said that one is the other and reciprocally,” which is problematic within Islamic theology for, when related to Allah, outlandish claims can be made regarding identity.<sup>28</sup> These two are grouped together because “*ittihad* and *hulul* are here generally taken as synonymous, and the concept of a ‘union’ of divinity with humanity is regarded as contradictory.”<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not advocate for any of these issues. Rather, within the text, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be attempting to illustrate how these charges are not applicable to the ontology that he and those like him advance.

Despite the text being of an alleged debate, there is some historical evidence that the issues raised were the main issues in Ibn Taymiyya’s relationship with Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. Regarding *tawassul* and *istighatha*, it is said that “following a popular demonstration, he [Ibn Taymiyya] was summoned” where he was questioned “on his interpretation of the doctrine of the intercession of the saints (*tawassul*; *istighatha*),” as a result of which, while “he was authorised to return to Syria,” he was “nevertheless held in Cairo and imprisoned for several months.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it is asserted that “following a demonstration by some 500 *Sufis* at the Cairo citadel against his teachings on the *Ittihadiyya Sufis*, Ibn Taymiyya was again brought to trial”<sup>31</sup> and that “in Shawwal 707 AH/1308 CE, he [Ibn Taymiyya] was examined regarding a work which

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<sup>26</sup> Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London: Stacey International, 1989), 161.

<sup>27</sup> Louis Massignon and Georges C. Anawati, “*hulul*,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), vol. III, 571.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas & Anawati, “*ittihad*,” 282 – 83.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>30</sup> Laoust, “Ibn Taymiyya,” 952. Regarding the issue of intercession, Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, 106, argues that “Ibn Taymiyya subscribed to a view of intercession which some of his latter-day readers and editors find difficult to accept” and that his views could be taken as “being indicative of Sufi inclinations in Ibn Taymiyya” though the work in which he puts forth these views “was subjected to an investigative discussion (*mihna*) at Court in AH 712”, which is after Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s death.

<sup>31</sup> Donald P. Little, “The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 4 (1973): 312.



he had written against the *Ittihadiyya*,”<sup>32</sup> indicating that the event involved the charge of *ittihad*. Thus, while there is some doubt regarding the text of the alleged debate, the content that it covers has historical legitimacy.

No attempt is made in this chapter to examine the issues raised by Ibn Taymiyya. These charges have a long history within Islam and are not confined to Ibn Taymiyya. Nor is there any attempt to explore their relation to Ibn Taymiyya’s work as a whole. The importance of these seemingly disparate issues, aside from being raised with the debate, is that all three categories of charges can be seen to depend on two differing conceptions of *tawhid*. It will be suggested that from the way these issues are raised by Ibn Taymiyya within the debate, while affirming *tawhid*, his conception of *tawhid* gives an ontological primacy to creation (*khalq*), whereas Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception gives ontological primacy to Allah, with no second.

### ***Tawhid, Allah, and creation (khalq)***

One of the key issues within this debate centres on an understanding of *tawhid*. As seen in chapter one, *tawhid* is “the act of believing and affirming that God is one and unique (*wahid*).”<sup>33</sup> It is not contended that either of these two figures denied *tawhid*. However, it is in the application of the implications of this phrase that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya can be seen to differ. While the term is absent from the Qur’an, “the principle that God is single is definitely proclaimed there in many instances” and beyond this the “oneness of God is something which the theologians ... are at pains to demonstrate rationally,” with the most common argument being that of “reciprocal hindrance” (*tamau*),<sup>34</sup> a method that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is well acquainted with.

*Tawhid* can be seen to be at the centre of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s worldview. As it appears within the text of the alleged debate, the affirmation of *tawhid* underpins each point. This is evident from the beginning where Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, in response to Ibn Taymiyya’s presence, remarks “look how

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<sup>32</sup> Mohammed Cheneb, “Ibn Taymiyya,” in *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 151.

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Gimaret, “*tawhid*,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), vol. X, 389.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

the Divine plan works itself out”<sup>35</sup> indicating the ontological primacy the former accords to Allah. As will be seen, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception of *tawhid* leaves no room for anything alongside Allah. Without denying the contingent existence of creation, in accordance with Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception of *tawhid*, it would not be possible to assert that his remark gives precedence to the Creator, and the Divine plan, over the creation (*khalq*) because this would place Creator and creation on the same ontological level. Rather, as will be argued, it is the ramifications of the exclusivity of Allah’s unicity that is the mark of difference between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s conceptions of *tawhid*. This difference is highlighted by the fact that Ibn Taymiyya considers *istighatha* and *tawwasul* or *hulul* and *ittihad* possible for, as will be argued, this would mean that there is something that has ontological co-existence alongside of Allah.

For Ibn Taymiyya’s accusations to hold, it would seem that he is reading into Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s soteriological cosmography the collapse of formal structures which conflates creation and Creator. Yet this does not hold for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah in that his argument can be construed as asserting that despite creation’s dominance within empirical data its cosmographical status is hierarchically inferior to the position generally assigned to it. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s response appears to emphasise the hierarchical prominence of Allah, though he is aware that no such hierarchy formally exists, in order to evoke within his adherents a performative cosmography. On the other hand, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen as dismissing Ibn Taymiyya’s support of formal structures in as far as it creates a false dichotomy between Creator and creation.

As a result of Allah’s ontological primacy, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, and those who share this conception of *tawhid*, cannot be charged with *istighatha*, calling for help, or *tawassul*, seeking aid, from other than Allah. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah does not respond directly when Ibn Taymiyya questions “are you claiming that I am misguided when I deny the validity of calling on anyone save Allah for aid (*istighatha*)”<sup>36</sup> for it is obvious to both of them that to do so would involve *shirk* as Ibn Taymiyya states it “smacks of idolatry.”<sup>37</sup> In seeking evidence for his point, Ibn Taymiyya cites that “the Prophet commanded his cousin ‘Abd Allah Ibn ‘Abbas not to ask of anyone to help

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<sup>35</sup> Kabbani, *Islamic Beliefs & Doctrine*, 368 – 369.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 370.

him other than Allah.”<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s response opposes Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of *istighatha* on several fronts. Firstly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, in clarifying the example raised by his opponent, protects Ibn Taymiyya from criticising and imputing *shirk* on one of the companions of Muhammad, which is considered blasphemous, by explaining that Muhammad “wanted him [Ibn ‘Abbas] to draw near to Allah not through familial relationship to the Prophet but through his knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> This is followed by the challenge “is there any Muslim possessed of real faith and believing in Allah and His Prophet who thinks that there is someone other than Allah who has autonomous power over events” or “someone who can reward him for his good deeds and punish him for his bad deeds other than Allah.”<sup>40</sup> In posing this question, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah can be seen to be narrowing the scope of their inquiry to those who affirm *tawhid* which limits Ibn Taymiyya’s response for if he were to reply in the affirmative he would be accused of *shirk*. Furthermore, in light of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception of *tawhid*, this question highlights the subtle difference in the ontology’s of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya. For, if Ibn Taymiyya were to reply in the affirmative then this would be an implicit denial of Allah being the master of all possibilities and having power over all possibilities.

The differences between the two ontologies proposed by these two figures are brought to the foreground in Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s example of the sentence “this food satisfies my appetite.”<sup>41</sup> Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah queries “does the food itself satisfy” or “is it the case that it is Allah who satisfies your appetite through the food.”<sup>42</sup> While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s questions are left open, their implication is clear. If satiety is ascribed to food, in the same way that aid can be ascribed to individuals, then, in light of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception of *tawhid*, it must be considered *shirk* because it is an ascription of power to something other than Allah. In no way can Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah be construed as advocating for a prohibition of food, or, by proxy, on seeking aid from individuals, for two reasons. Firstly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges that Allah “satisfies your appetite through the food,”<sup>43</sup> indicating the necessity of food. Secondly, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah deftly illustrates that Ibn Taymiyya’s position implies a *reduction ad absurdum*, namely that if

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 371.

*“istighatha* or seeking help is forbidden in the Shari’a because it can lead to idolatry, if this is the case, then we ought to prohibit grapes because they are a means to making wine.”<sup>44</sup> Food and aid, like grapes, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, are licit as long as they are accompanied with the awareness and knowledge that it is Allah who satisfies needs through them. This is an important example of where Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah admits formal structures while assigning them an inferior hierarchical importance than Ibn Taymiyya. In arguing against *istighatha*, Ibn Taymiyya’s position can be seen to imply a subtle form of *shirk* in that he, in a sense, is either giving ontological primacy or co-existence to contingent objects, whereas Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, arguing from his understanding of *tawhid*, presents a position that gives ontological primacy to Allah alone.

### ***The implications of tawhid for ontology***

Another of Ibn Taymiyya’s criticisms is that he felt that the conception of *tawhid* advocated for by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and others implied antinomianism.<sup>45</sup> This accusation can be seen to stem directly from Ibn Taymiyya’s ontology being applied to a conception of *tawhid* similar to that of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s. For, if, in accordance with Ibn Taymiyya, one holds that creation has ontological primacy or co-existence, then, confronted with the position that there is nothing alongside of Allah, as is held by Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and others, it would appear that creation does not have to do anything to obey Allah’s commandments, hence antinomianism. From this, according to Ibn Taymiyya, follows “the idea that man can incarnate Allah (*hulul*) or attain unity with Him (*ittihad*).”<sup>46</sup> There are two parts to this accusation. Firstly, there are groups who make claims of *hulul* and *ittihad* and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah acknowledges the existence of such individuals, such as “the phenomena of pseudo-Sufis,”<sup>47</sup> and accepts Ibn Taymiyya’s criticisms of them. Secondly, such accusations are understandable if and only if there is a confusion regarding the ontological domain. If one holds that creation has independent ontological existence, when confronted with the view that Allah is the sole ontological existent, is liable to make an error

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>45</sup> This, if proven, would be a particularly damaging charge, for it would be indicative of apostacy by those who hold these views.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 375.

equivalent to confusing panentheism with pantheism.<sup>48</sup> If Creator and creation is ontologically conflated, as appears to be the case with Ibn Taymiyya within this debate, then accusations of creation's identity with the Creator are liable to run rife. However, it follows from Ibn 'Ata' Allah's conception of *tawhid* that both *hulul* and *ittihad* involve forms of associationism (*shirk*) in as far as both views posit two existents, the Incarnator and the incarnated, in the case of *hulul*, and the identifier and the identified, in the case of *ittihad*. For this reason Ibn 'Ata' Allah, and those who share his conception of *tawhid*, would agree with Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of both ideas. In this agreement it becomes apparent that Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Ibn Taymiyya are not opponents in the sense of two individuals holding mutually exclusive positions.

Within the text of the debate, Ibn 'Ata' Allah cleverly side steps all possible accusations of antinomianism. At the beginning of their encounter Ibn 'Ata' Allah queries "what is it you know about me" to which Ibn Taymiyya responds that he believes his interlocutor to be "a man of scrupulous piety, abundant learning, integrity and truthfulness in speech" and that there is "no one like [Ibn 'Ata' Allah] either in Egypt or Syria who loves Allah more nor who is more self-effacing in Him nor who is more obedient."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyya later states that Ibn 'Ata' Allah is "from the men of *Shari'a*."<sup>50</sup> It is important to see that such praise is neither arbitrary nor self-serving. Ibn 'Ata' Allah narrowed the scope of their discussion to those "believing in Allah and His Prophet" who also affirm that only Allah "has autonomous power over events."<sup>51</sup> As a result of this their respective positions can be considered to have meaning in as far as they themselves are included amongst such individuals. In this context an *ad hominem* argument is a legitimate rebuttal of one's opponent if it shows them not to believe in Allah and His Prophet. In eliciting this response from Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn 'Ata' Allah precludes this line of argument, with regard to himself, from his opponent's arsenal. Ibn Taymiyya's acknowledgement that Ibn 'Ata' Allah is obedient to Allah and follows the *Shari'a* indicates that his practices are contrary to antinomianism. Furthermore, as an adherent of the Shadhiliyya,

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<sup>48</sup> While there may be an argument to be made that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's position is equivalent to panentheism, a claim that is not strictly being made here, it should be recognized that his views are contrary to process theology. While the discussion presented within this does not necessarily correspond with the following, an interesting discussion of panentheism within Islam can be found within Meena Sharify-Funk and William Rory Dickson, "Traces of Panentheism in Islam: Ibn al-'arabi and the Kaleidoscope of Being," in *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions*, ed. Loriliai Biernacki and Phillip Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 142 – 160.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 375.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 371.

Ibn 'Ata' Allah is an advocate of Abu'l Hassan Al-Shadhili's position on this matter, who stated that "if your mystical unveiling (*kashf*) diverges from the Qur'an and Sunnah, hold fast to these two and take no notice of your unveiling,"<sup>52</sup> illustrating that he cannot be considered an advocate of antinomianism.

For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, adhering to the *Shari'a* is the means to affirm *tawhid* and the safeguard against associationism (*shirk*). This culminates in ridding oneself of "inward and outward associationism (*shirk*)."<sup>53</sup> The degree of subtlety involved might not at first be apparent. Beyond the obvious attribution of partners to Allah, Ibn 'Ata' Allah quotes Abu'l Abbas al-Mursi as having said "kindness is a veil which conceals the One who is Most Kind."<sup>54</sup> Regarding this Ibn 'Ata' Allah comments that "kindness is a veil when one finds repose in it and is tempted to be content with the kindness itself."<sup>55</sup> This point is further emphasised in al-Wasiti's statement, quoted by Ibn 'Ata' Allah, that "the enjoyment of obedience is a deadly poison," to which Ibn 'Ata' Allah explains that enjoyment of obedience often results in a missed "opportunity to demonstrate sincere devotion" as one's devotion continues "because of the sweetness and enjoyment that you find in them" and "not out of loyalty to your Lord."<sup>56</sup>

Ibn 'Ata' Allah's position regarding the contingent existence of formal structures is evident in his discussion of the phrase "there is no gods but Allah" (*la ilaha illa'llah*). For Ibn 'Ata' Allah, the affirmation of this phrase, being an affirmation of *tawhid* and a denial of *shirk*, contains an assertion that ontological existence belongs solely to Allah, while being aware that Allah is not confined by that which is ontologically existent. According to Ibn 'Ata' Allah, in affirming *la ilaha illa'llah* "attention is turned away from the created universe only with respect to its creatureliness, not with respect with the Truth's appearance therein"<sup>57</sup> because it is "not to His failure to appear in everything but rather, to their [creation's] inability to perceive Him in

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<sup>52</sup> Al-Sha'rani quoted by Lory, "al-Shadhili," 171.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Miftah al-Falah*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *Lata'if al-Minan*, 276.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

everything.”<sup>58</sup> For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, *tawhid* is not strictly an effacement of creation, rather the contingently existent must acknowledge their contingency for “[earthly] causes must needs exist, while at the same time, one must be absent to them in order to witness [the divine causality behind them].”<sup>59</sup> From this it is possible to see that, according to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, without denying the contingent existence of the formal structures, the empirical nature of such structures has a dramatic epistemic impact. For Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, while creation has contingent existence, it does so only in as far as it the means through which Allah communicates with each creation, just as in the case with food, grapes, and aid.

By paring back the traditional reading of the relationship between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Ibn Taymiyya a new picture emerges. While they did not agree with each other’s positions, they cannot be considered opponents in the sense of holding contrary positions regarding any of the issues raised within the course of the text of their alleged debate. Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah repeatedly illustrates that he does not occupy the space that Ibn Taymiyya accuses him of and that, as a result, such accusations bypass Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, as well as those who share his position. Ibn Taymiyya’s accusations do not affect Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s position. Contrary to their supposed staunch opposition, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is seen to agree with the conclusion of his interlocutor on each of the issues raised. While this chapter has taken a different approach, it can be seen to confirm what has been shown in each of the preceding chapters, namely that, while it is not always explicit, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is staunchly committed to an Islamic paradigm. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s commitment to an orthodox Islamic paradigm, while advancing views labelled “Sufic,” is openly acknowledged by his supposedly hostile critic in the course of the debate they allegedly had.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 54.

## Conclusion

This thesis has had two objectives. First, to contextualise and redefine the category “Sufism” and secondly, to show that a more refined conception of Sufism is needed in order to account for the works of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. While it was assumed that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was indebted, to some degree, to an Islamic paradigm, it can now be seen that unless his works are contextualised within an Islamic framework they would lack much of their coherence.

This thesis has argued that the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is best understood within Islamic paradigms. Nevertheless, the thesis only makes a modest contribution towards rethinking the category and the field. There are strict limits on the conclusions that can be drawn from the study of one Sufic thinker. However, it has been shown that more attention to contextualisation is necessary to account for the diverse thinkers and works that are included within the vast, complex, and contested category of “Sufism.” In the case of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it can now be seen that unless his works are contextualised within an Islamic framework they are likely to be misunderstood. This one example points to the limits of Sufism as a generic category, especially if it is interpreted in anachronistic terms as a form of mysticism or as a manifestation of the perennial philosophy.

Thus from this work two things become apparent. Sufism is not merely a form of Islamic mysticism. It is a dynamic and complex phenomenon whose function, while differing and adapting across temporal and geographical localities, can be seen as constant. Furthermore, Sufism generally, and the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah specifically, cannot but be understood within an Islamic paradigm. However, in utilising this category for understanding Islam it must be acknowledged that it is unlike other genres of Islamic learning due to its pan-discipline approach to the material that it draws on in order to maintain its function. While this work has emphasised the proactive element of Sufism within Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works, due to a prevailing view that his achievements are bound up with the reactive element of Sufism and his response to Ibn Taymiyya, it can be seen that a) he combines both elements of Sufism and as such maintains the function of Sufism, keeping open the salvific potential for both the individual and the community and b) like Sufism generally, his oeuvre indicates the work of an inherently Islamic thinker.



## Appendix 1 - The Lacuna

This sample of translations of the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah has a twofold function. Firstly, it shows the importance of Ibn 'Ata' Allah through the range of languages into which his works have been translated. Secondly, and more importantly, it shows that, despite the wide dissemination of his works, there is yet to be an attempt to analyse the relationship between the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah in any of these languages. It is understandable that such an analysis has not been made within the works cited here, as their purpose is primarily to present the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah to the non-Arabic reading world. Nevertheless such an analysis has yet to be made within a non-Arabic language. This sample of translations is of primarily European languages, however, without being definitive, it is sufficient for illustrating the above two points. It will be shown that, despite the translation of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's work into multiple languages, there is a lacuna in the analysis of the interrelations within Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre which this work partly bridges.

The works cited below can be divided roughly into two groups, representing two complementary ways used to present a work of Ibn 'Ata' Allah. One approach has been to contextualise the text by focusing on the history of its genre and its reception, as typified by the work of Nwyia.<sup>1</sup> Another approach has been to contextualise Ibn 'Ata' Allah's historical significance by focusing on his position within Mamluk Egypt and within the Shadhiliyya, as typified by the works of Danner.<sup>2</sup> These two approaches are not mutually exclusive; however, the method of contextualisation is often dependant on the degree of influence of or dependence on the works on Nwyia and Danner respectively. This has resulted in translations developing a sort of standardised introduction, which varies, not in content, but in the depth of detail. One point of difference in these two approaches is in regard to mentioning works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other than that being translated, which generally follows, either explicitly or implicitly, Danner's overview, which has been quoted in full in the introduction.

That there is a sort of standardised introduction to the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah goes some way to illustrating why the lacuna has persisted. As mentioned above, and elaborated below, the

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<sup>1</sup> Nwyia, *Ibn 'Ata' Allah*, especially 46 – 71.

<sup>2</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 1 – 14; *Book of Wisdom*, 13 – 34.

majority of the works dealing with Ibn 'Ata' Allah have been translations. While most of these succeed in presenting Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works to an audience who cannot read Arabic, there is little room for any analysis of the material. The standardised introduction generally includes some introductory comments on Sufism in general, and the Shadhiliyya particularly, some biographical information on Ibn 'Ata' Allah, sometimes extending to include his two predecessors, some comments on the genre of the text, and some comments on the translation. While there are some variations on the standardised introduction, they are mostly minor differences, which in no way rectify the lacuna highlighted within this work.

Before proceeding to illustrate the depth and consistency to which this lacuna persists, a preliminary note is necessary. Without the work of the individuals mentioned below this work would not be possible. It should be noted that no comment is made regarding the translations of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works, nor is any comparative approach between translations attempted, for this is beyond the scope of this work. With the majority of these works the primary intention has been the translation and, as a result, not much attention has been given to analysing the content of the text, even less on its relationship with Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other works. Acknowledging this is important because it explains why most follow the standardised introduction. Furthermore, acknowledging the standardised introduction format should not be seen as either a lack on the part of the translator or criticism thereof. The point remains throughout to show that despite the work of these translators, across numerous languages, an analysis of Ibn 'Ata' Allah has yet to be significantly pursued within a European language.

## English

While Danner was the first to translate the *kitab al-Hikam* into English as a whole, it was preceded by two partial translations. These were Archer and Austin respectively. Archer's early translation preceded the now two standard translations of Nwyia and Danner by almost forty years. Archer's stated intention was to secure "a body of information on the character of Muhammadan Mysticism (*Sufism*) [sic] to be found in the Dutch East Indies, and particularly that type of mysticism found in the Island of Sumatra."<sup>3</sup> Archer's interest in Ibn 'Ata' Allah, and the *Kitab al-Hikam* specifically, extends only so far as it is indicative of Sumatran Sufism. His sole entry on Ibn 'Ata' Allah merely mentions that he was "a member of the Shadhili order,"

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<sup>3</sup> Archer, *Muhammadan Mysticism*, i.

“was a most vigorous opponent of Ibn Taimiya,” and “died in the Madrasa al-Mansuriya in Cairo in the year 1309.”<sup>4</sup> Aside from attempting to “make the meaning of the Hikam easier” by providing a “gist of the translation”<sup>5</sup> before the translation itself, Archer has no concern for Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah or his other works. As a result, Archer’s translation does not follow the standardised introduction, which is perhaps a result of his interest in Sumatran Sufism taking precedence over any interest in the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah.

As a precursor, Austin’s partial translation does not follow a standardised introduction. The *Kitab al-Hikam* is singled out for particular attention as it “must rank amongst the finest works of spiritual counsel, not only in Islam, but in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Austin gives the briefest of overviews of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s life, though manages to cite his supposed antagonism with Ibn Taymiyya. There is some mention of the commentary literature as well as a short discussion of the works central themes.

Danner released two versions of the *Kitab al-Hikam*. While these two works are essentially the same translation, the earlier is aimed at a scholarly audience, more so than the latter. The earlier work has key terms transliterated throughout the text, while the latter omits these. While the introduction to the earlier work presupposes a greater depth of understanding of Sufism than the latter, the method of introducing Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is essentially the same. Danner places emphasis on situating Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah within his cultural milieu, detailing his place within “the revitalisation of Sufi gnosis (*ma’rifah*) that was so evident in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century,”<sup>7</sup> while locating him amongst the earliest Shadhiliyya adherents to gain repute, due to his works being “the earliest written documents of the Sufi order Shadhiliyya.”<sup>8</sup> While both works contain sections on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s other works, the earlier of which was quoted in full in the introduction, little emphasis is placed on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s use of genre, nor is his work contextualised within the literary genre he utilises. Regarding what Danner calls Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., i.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., ii.

<sup>6</sup> Austin, “Counsels,” 207.

<sup>7</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*, 3.

“literary legacy,” he writes “we can easily see his importance, historically speaking.”<sup>9</sup> Danner is here referring to Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah being the earliest of the Shadhiliyya to compose any known literary works, rather than commenting on his use of specific writing styles. Danner’s use of historical contextualisation represents one of the primary methods for introducing Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, which has been continuously referred to throughout a large portion of the material on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah.

As mentioned above, Danner’s summation of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works has become standard and, along with Nwyia, is the work most frequently cited. Shoshan’s work, while not explicitly about Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, relies heavily on it, especially the *Taj al-arus*, for an understanding of Mamluk Egypt. Regarding Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre, Shoshan<sup>10</sup> reiterates Danner’s work,<sup>11</sup> while adding a few references not available to Danner. However, Shoshan emphatically disagrees with Danner’s view that the *Taj al-arus* is “of minor importance,”<sup>12</sup> countering that it is a “unique source” that “allows us to glimpse the ideas that were preached to the ordinary people by a leading Sufi *shaykh*.”<sup>13</sup> While this refutation reinstates the importance of the *Taj al-arus*, it does not provide any detailed insight into its relation to the rest of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre.

Danner-Fadae essentially follows the same outline.<sup>14</sup> Danner-Fadae includes a few more details, highlighting and repeating passages, including that the *Kitab al-Tanwir* is “a kind of commentary” on the *Hikam*, though no further details on this comment are provided.<sup>15</sup> While neither Shoshan nor Danner-Fadae intended to explicitly bridge the hiatus in the existing literature, nor was their intentions to examine the corpus of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, both have helped

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<sup>9</sup> Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 90 – 91.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in full above.

<sup>12</sup> Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 91 n. 61.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Danner, *Key to Salvation*, 13 – 21. Mary Ann Danner-Fadae, as she is now known, is referred to as Danner-Fadae within this section of the text to differentiate her work from that of her late husband Victor Danner.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

maintain the view that, aside from a few repeated passages, the content of each text is independent of the others.

Like Danner-Fadae and Shoshan, Roberts' work follows the method of Danner. Roberts does not consider it necessary to restate the available material, writing "for a detailed and scholarly overview of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's literary corpus, as well as additional biographical information ... see the Translator's Introduction to Dr. Mary Ann Koury Danner's *The Key to Salvation and the Lamp of Souls*."<sup>16</sup> While Roberts does direct the reader to one of the most thorough introductions to Ibn 'Ata' Allah, as mentioned above, Danner-Fadae does not present any information regarding the relationship between Ibn 'Ata' Allah's various works. Furthermore, by directing readers away to another work, Roberts fails to locate and adequately discuss the importance of the *Lata'if al-Minan*. This is surprising as it is, after the *Kitab al-Hikam*, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's most sighted work, though primarily for the biographical information that it contains. While Roberts' work does not explicitly contribute to the gap, there is nothing within it that would help dismiss it.

That the lacuna exists within Shoshan, Danner-Fadae, and Roberts is perhaps a result of their works depending, to varying degrees, on the initial work of Danner. The work of Durkee, while acknowledging Danner's "great service to the readers of the English language through his magnificent translation of the *Hikam*,"<sup>17</sup> does not. The work of this contemporary Shaykh of the Shadhili order, while not unscholarly, is more devotional than those previously discussed. While the section on Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works is too long to quote in full here,<sup>18</sup> it is readily apparent that, like the others, the intention is to present an overview of the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah. While similar in format to Danner's work, Durkee's overview contains more details on both the content of the texts as well as their history. While Durkee does acknowledge the scholarly works that have been done, he allows Ibn 'Ata' Allah to convey the content and tone of some works by including quotes from the texts. Despite the significant differences, Durkee, like the others discussed, does not examine any possible interrelations between the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Thus, despite approaching the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah from a different angle, Durkee does not make any contribution towards dismissing the lacuna.

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, *Subtle Blessings*, vii.

<sup>17</sup> Durkee, *School of the Shadhdhuliyah*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 54 – 56.

Reliance on Danner's work cannot be considered the sole reason for this lack of inter-textual analysis. Hakim, a student of Durkee, makes no reference to any of the other works relating to Ibn 'Ata' Allah in his translation of the *kitab al-Tanwir*. Instead of introducing the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah, he focuses on the importance of the *kitab al-Tanwir*, of which he writes, "it deals with a cardinal doctrine of the Shadhdhuli teaching," also citing that of this work it has been said it "combines completeness with conciseness."<sup>19</sup> That Hakim's concerns do not venture beyond this work are understandable in light of the fact that his Shaykh told him to take on the task of translating this book<sup>20</sup> "for his own and others spiritual and intellectual development."<sup>21</sup> While Hakim's work keeps to the instructions given to him in translating the *kitab al-Tanwir*, it does not help to fill the gap.

Kugle<sup>22</sup> makes some moves towards filling the gap, though this is not his focus and the links are not developed. Kugle's focus is to show that comments regarding the *Kitab al-Tanwir*, such as "companion piece" to and "a kind of commentary" on the *Hikam*, are too soft.<sup>23</sup> Kugle asserts that, not only is the *Kitab al-Tanwir* an introduction to the *Hikam*, "this text serves as an introduction to Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other texts."<sup>24</sup> His view is that the *Kitab al-Tanwir* aims at developing virtues while the *Hikam* aims at developing insight, the *Miftah al-falah* draws on the structured practice advocated for in the *Kitab al-Tanwir* to implement the invocation it prescribes, and the anecdotes of the *Lata'if* are commented on and explained in the *Kitab al-Tanwir*.<sup>25</sup> While these views could be deemed correct, they are far from comprehensive,

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<sup>19</sup> Hakim, *Illuminating Guidance*, iii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>22</sup> The choice of quoting Hakim's translation of the *Kitab al-Tanwir* over Kugle's translation throughout this work has been done for several reasons. Chief among them is Kugle's attempt at a non-gendered translation which, aside from appearing odd at times for those familiar with Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other works, contradicts the metaphysics and ontology set out by Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Ibn 'Ata' Allah, like other Sufi authors, encourages his readers to be masculine, meaning active, towards creation and feminine, meaning receptive, towards the Divine. A non-gendered translation is liable to omit this important distinction.

<sup>23</sup> Scott Kugle, trans., *The Book of Illumination* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 40 – 41.

dealing with the relation of one text to the others rather than the interrelations within the corpus. Furthermore, without disagreeing with Kugle's view, it must be acknowledged that his broad sweeping statement lacks all but the most minimal evidence and thus cannot be said to rectify the lacuna.

at-Tarjumana's translation of *Unwan al-Tawfiq fi adab al-Tariq*<sup>26</sup> provides no introduction to either Ibn 'Ata' Allah or the text. It does provide a translation of the Qasida of Abu Madyan,<sup>27</sup> upon which it is based, as well as two other commentaries of the Qasida alongside of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's. at-Tarjumana does include Shar'ani's short biography of Ibn 'Ata' Allah, which does not state much more than his soterialogical lineage, his death, the place of his tomb, and a list of some of his better known works.<sup>28</sup> While this work does not "introduce" Ibn 'Ata' Allah in the standardised method mentioned above, it does show that Danner's method of introduction could be seen as an extension of Shar'ani's biography.

Schwein's work, while involving the work of Ibn 'Ata' Allah, focuses on the lacuna within contemporary Islamic studies regarding commentary literature. Schwein acknowledges the importance of the *Kitab al-Hikam* as "a succinct exposition of the principles and practices of mystical awakening,"<sup>29</sup> noting that Ibn 'Ata' Allah's most important other works are the *Lata'if al-Minan* and the *Kitab al-Tanwir*.<sup>30</sup> However, his focus is not so much on the *Kitab al-Hikam* as it is on its commentary literature. Schwein's goal to expose the importance of commentary literature within Islamic studies is achieved through an inter-commentary analysis which focuses on six of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's *Hikam* and their commentary by Ibn 'Abbad, Ahmad Zarruq, and Ibn 'Ajiba. Although Schwein's work does not directly relate to the work undertaken here, its importance lies in highlighting a further and important gap in the literature concerning Ibn 'Ata' Allah.

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<sup>26</sup> at-Tarjumana, *Self Knowledge*, 6 – 18. While this translation is less scholarly than that of Kugle's, especially given that a) there are no explanatory footnotes and b) some of the technical terms have been left untranslated, it is given precedence over Kugle's translation for the reasons cited above, see footnote 22.

<sup>27</sup> Another translation of this *Qasida* can be found in Vincent Cornell, *The Way of Abu Madyan* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 162 – 165.

<sup>28</sup> at-Tarjumana, *Self Knowledge*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Schwein, "Illuminated Arrival," 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Sambur's work on the psychology of prayer is heavily indebted to Danner's work and as such it is not surprising that it uses a Danner style biography to contextualise Ibn 'Ata' Allah.<sup>31</sup> Aside from this, a comment should be made on Sambur's understanding of the Shaykh-student dynamic, especially as presented by Ibn 'Ata' Allah. While there is an authoritarian aspect to this dynamic, Sambur sees the Shaykh as occupying the position of intermediary between Allah and the individual. In discussing the function of soteriological practices he writes that "the [Divine] Names and the worship become tools in the hands of Shaykhs in order to maintain their authoritarian power."<sup>32</sup> This does not entertain the possibility of a Shaykh acting as a facilitator to the student to realise their inherent relationship with Allah. Rather than being seen as an "aim to preserve the 'power elites' of Sufi orders"<sup>33</sup> or a form of "spiritual militarism,"<sup>34</sup> the Shaykh-student dynamic can be viewed in a manner that is borne out by Ibn 'Ata' Allah's soteriological semiotics. The Shaykh, like all of creation, can be seen as a sign (*ayat*) of Allah, though, being in the same form as the student, is less subtle than other signs and is more easily comprehended, thus providing more direct feedback for the student's soteriological development. Nevertheless, there is potential for the Shaykh-student dynamic to be exploited, which is why many Sufis, Ibn 'Ata' Allah included, have written on the necessity of finding an authentic Shaykh and what constitutes one.

While I am aware of Danner's thesis on Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Roberds partial translation of Shadhiliyya devotional literature, I have been unable to consult them. Furthermore, while I am aware of Jackson's translation of the *Taj al-'arus*, it became available after the substantive research for this work had been concluded and has not been included at the time of submission.<sup>35</sup>

## French

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<sup>31</sup> See Sambur, "Prayer in the Psychology," 191 – 198.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>35</sup> Sherman Jackson, trans., *Sufism for Non-Sufis? Ibn 'Ata' Allah al-Sakandari's Taj al-'Arus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).



Of the languages that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works have been translated into, French is probably the most common; having translations of almost all of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s known works. The earliest, and best known, is Nwyia’s translation of the *Kitab al-Hikam*. Nwyia does situate Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah within the history of Sufism generally, and within the history of the Shadhiliyya more specifically, giving a brief history of the rise of this order. However, greater attention is given to documenting multiple examples of the aphoristic genre utilised throughout the history of Sufism and locating this work within this tradition. By contextualising Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah according to the literary genre of the *Kitab al-Hikam*, Nwyia does so at the expense of examining the relation of this particular genre to the rest of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre.

Similarly, Gloton, though not as explicitly as Nwyia, locates Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work *al-qasd al-mujarrad fi ma’rifat al-ism al-mufrad Allah* within the genre of commentaries on the Divine names. Through a series of etymological discussion, Gloton situates this work amongst other Sufi works dealing with the names of Allah, such as Fakh ad-Din al-Razi,<sup>36</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, and Abd al-Karim Jili,<sup>37</sup> amongst others. While Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah has written elsewhere on the soteriological benefits of the invocation (*dhikr*) of various Divine names, as Gloton recognises,<sup>38</sup> the primary focus of this work being the solitary name (*al-ism al-mufrad*) places this text alongside of those works that deal with various Divine names, such as those by al-Ghazali or Fakh ad-Din al-Razi, due to the all-comprehensive nature of the Divine name “Allah.” Thus, without explicitly following Nwyia’s lead, Gloton follows a similar method in contextualising this work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah.

Thibon, in the preface to Penot’s translation of the *kitab al-Tanwir*, approaches the text from different angles in order to contextualise the work. From an examination of the main concepts of the text, namely *tadbir* and *rizq*,<sup>39</sup> to highlighting key points in the method of presentation and some notes on apparent influences,<sup>40</sup> Thibon sees within the work of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, and

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<sup>36</sup> Gloton, *sur le nom Allah*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 47 – 47, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 67 – 75.

<sup>39</sup> Thibon in Abd Allah Penot, trans., *De l’Abandon de la Volnté proper* (Lyon: Alif, 1997), 12, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18, 21.

the *Kitab al-Tanwir* specifically, a melting pot of variegated influences from Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Ghazali,<sup>41</sup> to the *malamatiyya*<sup>42</sup> and Abu Yazid Bistami.<sup>43</sup> While Thibon concedes that a thorough study of these influences need to undertaken, in bringing these influences to the fore the *kitab al-Tanwir* is seen to occupy an important place within the history of Sufi literature. In contextualising the work in this manner, Thibon’s preface can be seen to follow a Nwyia style introduction.

While Geoffroy’s introduction to his translation of the *Lata’if al-Minan* has a Danner style contextualisation of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, it is short, only capturing some of the main events in his life. However, in the postscript, Geoffroy delves into some of the themes of the *Lata’if al-Minan*, including the Muhammdean inheritance,<sup>44</sup> Sainthood,<sup>45</sup> and the Unicity of Being,<sup>46</sup> and in doing so can be included amongst those of Nwyia’s style of contextualisation. Interestingly, Geoffroy’s study of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s conception of the Unicity of Being shows that it is closer to Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception than has been previously thought, especially by Nwyia.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the interrelations between Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works remain unexamined.

Geoffroy has also provided a more comprehensive introduction than the above to the French translation of al-Bouti’s extensive commentary on the *Kitab al-Hikam*.<sup>48</sup> Geoffroy takes much of the biographical information presented here from his previously mentioned translation of the *Lata’if al-Minan*, though it is interesting to note that he states that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah was born in 1259 CE, where as all other sources merely state that he was born sometime around the middle

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 14, 22 – 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Geoffroy, trans., *La sagesse des maîtres soufis* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), 285.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>48</sup> Geoffroy in Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti, *Paroles Sublimes*, trans. Abdallah D. Penot, Idris Devos, and Samia Touati (Paris: Sagesse d’Orient, 2011), 15 – 34.

of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> If it was not enough to side this introduction with the Nwyia style contextualisation simple due to the degree to which it draws on the work of Nwyia, it is interesting that not only is there a section titled “the genre of the *Hikam* before and after Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah,”<sup>50</sup> there is also material contextualising al-Bouti’s commentary within the existing commentary literature on the *Kitab al-Hikam*.<sup>51</sup> Geoffroy does comment that “in the opinion of all the commentators and observers, the *Hikam* is impregnated, often implicitly, with the spirit of the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet” and that it is “of course the conformity to the Sunni model from which appreciation” of this work stems,<sup>52</sup> a point that, while known in traditional circles, is not often acknowledged in academic discourse. Yet, despite taking quotes from the *Lata’if al-Minan* and the *Kitab al-Tanwir* to illustrate how Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah comments, often implicitly, on his own work, this introduction does not bridge the gap in the existing literature.

It is only Macnamara’s translation of the *Miftah al-Falah* that has a truly Danner style contextualisation of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah. The focus on the biographical elements of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s life shows him to be a forerunner of the literary tradition of the Shadhiliyya. While giving an overview of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s literary output, the analysis is brief. While acknowledging the popularity of the *Kitab al-Hikam*,<sup>53</sup> Macnamara, contrary to the majority, does not view it as Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s most important work, stating “of all of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works, the work presented here [the *Miftah al-Falah*] is the most important and most needed as it concerns and discloses the practices and general method of the Shadhiliyya.”<sup>54</sup> Without doubting that this is one of the reasons that the *Miftah al-Falah* is important, Macnamara would have to delve deep into Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s oeuvre to substantiate this claim.

Of the remaining translations into French, neither could be categorised into either a Danner or Nwyia style contextualisation. Penot’s translation of the *Taj al-arus* does not have an

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 27 – 28.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>53</sup> Macnamara, *clef de la réalisation*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 35.

introduction or postscript and thus cannot be placed into either category. Burckhardt's short introduction to his and Buret's translation of the *Kitab al-Hikam* focuses on the "spiritual psychology" inherent within the text. While there is basic biographical information, Burckhardt's focus can be summed in the following passage: one "would not just say that the *Hikam* contains all the Shadhiliyya (Shadhilite) teaching or better – that this amounts to – the total Sufi doctrine; to make this, these contents must above all be applied to the life of the soul in all situations and at every moment."<sup>55</sup> Burckhardt is highlighting that, while the *Kitab al-Hikam* is full of metaphysical insights, they remain empty words until they are embodied. For Burckhardt the aphorisms of the *Kitab al-Hikam* are continuously alluding to "the extremely subtle and precarious issue of the point of contact between the created and uncreated, the limited and the limitless, man and God,"<sup>56</sup> which has been highlighted in the preceding chapters through the problem of *rizq*. Rather than focusing on the genre of the text or too much on the author of the words, Burckhardt is encouraging the readers to partake in the soteriological process presented within the text. In this manner, Burckhardt's introduction cannot be placed alongside either Danner or Nwyia.

## Spanish

Of the works of Ibn 'Ata' Allah available in Spanish, two have come indirectly from the Arabic. The *Kitab al-Hikam* appears to have come from Danner's English translation with a translation of introduction, endnotes, and glossary of his more accessible and less scholarly English edition.<sup>57</sup> The Spanish edition of the *Lata'if al-Minan* is a translation of Geoffroy's French translation.<sup>58</sup> These include nothing more than what is in the original and thus, aside from making these works available in Spanish, do not contribute anything further to the analysis of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's oeuvre.

Of the translations that have come direct from the Arabic, González's translation of the *Kitab at-Tanwir* is particularly important. This is because, aside from general comments on the

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<sup>55</sup> Burckhardt in El Haj Abd-ar-Rahmane Buret and Titus Burckhardt, trans., *Hikam – Paroles de sagesse* (Milano: Arche, 1999), 8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>57</sup> Danner, *Book of Wisdom*. Carmen Liaño, trans., *El libro de la sabiduría* (Madrid: Sufi, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Geoffroy, *La sagesse*. María Tabuyo and Agustín López, trans., *La enseñanza de los maestros sufíes* (Madrid: Alquitara, 2008).

importance of the *Kitab at-Tanwir*, González notes that his translation was the first complete translation into a European language.<sup>59</sup> González relies primarily on the work of Nwyia and Palacios, yet, while aware of his own contribution, does not acknowledge any other forerunners. Aside from noting that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is the first commentator for the Shadhiliyya,<sup>60</sup> that the *Kitab al-Hikam* is his most widely read work, and that the *Lata’if al-Minan* is a sort of spiritual history of the Shadhiliyya,<sup>61</sup> there is no further analysis of the oeuvre.

Two other translations have been made directly from the Arabic, both of which are translations of the *Kitab al-Hikam*. Laraki’s introduction has a short biography, though it does place the *Kitab al-Hikam* in the tradition of al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum ad-Din*, al-Qushairi’s *Risala*, Abu Talib al-Miakkī’s *Qut al-Qulub*, and Suhrawardi’s *‘Awarif*,<sup>62</sup> and for this, while brief, can be counted amongst those of Nwyia’s style of contextualisation. Gutiérrez’s more extensive introduction draws out some of the soteriological aspects of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s work, similar to Burckhardt, though places it with the more widely known aspects of the Sufi soteriological framework. Gutiérrez writes that “man in this world is plunged into spiritual oblivion, in an egoistic state, believes it is an ‘I’ independent and autonomous with respect to the will of God”<sup>63</sup> and that rectifying this and reaffirming the covenant that the humankind made with God testifying to the latter’s Lordship as mentioned in the Qur’an (7: 172) is the driving force behind Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s writings, amongst others. It is difficult to side Gutiérrez’s work with Nwyia for while it does contextualise the content of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s main themes, with little biographical information, it does so solely within the Shadhiliyya without contextualising it within a wider framework.

The work of Palacios, as an early forerunner within this field, is worth noting. The work that is closest to the topic at hand focuses on Ibn Abbad of Ronda,<sup>64</sup> who is renowned for, among

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<sup>59</sup> Juan J. González, trans., *Sobre el abandono de sí mismo* (Madrid: Hiperión, 1994), 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Ali Laraki, trans., *Al-Hikam Aforismos Sufies* (Palma de Mallorca: Kutubia Mayurqa, 2003), 12.

<sup>63</sup> Francesc Gutiérrez, trans., *Al-Hikam (Aforismos Sufies)* (Barcelona: Los Pequeños Libros De La Sabiduría, 2010), 16.

<sup>64</sup> Originally published in 1933, see Miguel A. Palacios, *Saint John of the Cross and Islam*, trans. Howard W. Yoder and Elmer H. Douglas (New York: Vantage, 1981).

other things, his commentary on Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s *Kitab al-Hikam*. The bulk of this work consists of a partial translation of Ibn Abbad’s commentary. Palacios mentions that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s most famous works after the *Kitab al-Hikam* “are entitled *Tanwir* and *Lata’if*, and are the ones that Ibn Abbad used so much in his commentaries on the *Hikam*.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, despite this early acknowledgement of the traditional commentators’ realisation of the interconnectedness of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works this has still been overlooked by modern scholars and commentators.

## German

Schimmel’s introduction to her translation of the *Kitab al-Hikam* follows the above mentioned standardised biographical overview. It is mentioned that Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah is to be counted among the great early adherents of the Shadhiliyya.<sup>66</sup> Moving to the events and catastrophes that shaped the 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic world, such as the Mongol invasion and the fall of Baghdad, Schimmel noted that only Egypt was left standing, which shifted the existing political landscape.<sup>67</sup> After giving a summary of basic Sufi doctrine, as well as mentioning some of their practices, she moves onto Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works. However, aside from common comments regarding the *Kitab al-Hikam*, such as its succinctness,<sup>68</sup> the difficulty of translation,<sup>69</sup> its handbook nature,<sup>70</sup> its lack of apparent logical order,<sup>71</sup> and its focus on themes such as obedience, thankfulness, and wisdom, the only other work mentioned is the *Lata’if al-Minan*, which is done so only in passing.<sup>72</sup> It is surprising that there is not a Danner style summary of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s works, though this is understandable in light of the fact that, while acknowledging Danner’s work, in Schimmel’s eyes, Nwyia is considered the greatest interpreter and translator of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah in the west.<sup>73</sup> Considering that Schimmel did not deem it

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>66</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, trans., *Bedrängnisse sind Teppiche voller Gnaden*, (Germany: Herder, 1987), 7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 7 – 8.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 15.

necessary to even mention Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s other works, it is not surprising that this lacuna has persisted.

While I am aware of Sobieroj’s partial translation of the *Miftah al-Falah* and Schwarzmüller’s comparative study of Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah and Meister Eckhart, I have been unable to procure copies of these theses.

## Italian

Valdrè, while relying heavily on Nwyia’s work, finds a middle ground between the two approaches in her translation to the *kitab al-Hikam*. Initially there is a biographical overview of the Shadhiliyya<sup>74</sup> and Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah’s place within it.<sup>75</sup> This is immediately followed by a study of the *Kitab al-Hikam*, mainly drawn from Nwyia’s work, though it does include some comments from Ibn ‘Ajiba’s commentary on the *Kitab al-Hikam*. While Valdrè is not the only one to include both biographical and literary comments, her introduction seems to find a balance between the two, whereas others give greater attention to one aspect, sometimes at the expense of the other.

## Swedish

Ogén’s translation of the *Kitab al-Hikam* follows the standardised pattern. While Ogén draws from both Danner and Nwyia, he attaches more weight to the former than the latter. He includes the Danner style overview<sup>76</sup> and, while acknowledging that commentary literature exists, closes his introduction by stating that Danner was “absolutely right” in writing that “the *Hikam* itself, when properly understood and assimilated, ends up by being its own best commentary.”<sup>77</sup> To conclude with this, without elaborating, at best, causes confusion, or, at

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<sup>74</sup> Caterina Valdrè, trans., *Sentenze e Colloquio mistico* (Milano: Aldelphi, 1981), 17 – 20.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 20 – 24.

<sup>76</sup> Göran Ogén, trans., *Sufiska visdomsord* (Lund: Ogén, 1997), 106.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18, quoting Danner, *Sufi Aphorisms*, 17.

worst, contributes to the lacuna. While Danner's comment is correct, it is so for those with an advanced understanding, and consistent practice, of Sufism, for these individuals would have passed through a point where they utilised Ibn 'Ata' Allah's other works as well as the extensive literature. As Schwein's work illustrates, it is through the commentary literature that the extent to which the *Kitab al-Hikam* is commentary on itself becomes apparent. Like the other works mentioned above, while Ogén successfully brings one of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's texts into another language, it does not bridge the gap in our understanding of the relationship between Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works.

## Arabic

Mention must be made of Abu l-Wafa al-Taftazani's work *Ibn 'Ata' Allah al-Sikandari wa-tasawwufuh* (Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Sufism) for it, aside from commentary literature, represents the only apparent attempt to understand Ibn 'Ata' Allah's worldview. Despite a long held intention of Durkee to translate this work into English, it has yet to be done, and has not been consulted.<sup>78</sup> Without commenting on the content of this work, a few comments can be made, extending those made in the introduction. It should be remembered that al-Taftazani was writing under a regime where "modernism, secularism, socialism and Islamism (in that order) were dominant as official (or, in the case of Islamism, disguised) state ideologies in which the adherents of Sufism were often portrayed as fatalists, obscurantist or heretics."<sup>79</sup> These no doubt, at best, influenced his mode of expression or, at worst, curbed it, such that his work, in one way or another, had to be curtailed in order for it to find acceptance under the regime within which it was written. Without having read the work, it is comments such as "it was in his MA thesis on Ibn 'Ata' Allah al-Sikandari ... that he used psychological theories to explain religious experiences for the first time" and that "al-Taftazani used the arguments of European psychologists of mysticism such as J. H. Leuba, R. H. Thouless and W. James, who argued that religious feelings are an autonomous region of human experience,"<sup>80</sup> that would cause the

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<sup>78</sup> Abdullah Durkee, *The School of the Shadhdhuliyah: Volume 2 Origins* (Virginia: Green Mountain School, forthcoming).

<sup>79</sup> Christmann, "Reconciling Sufism," 177.

<sup>80</sup> The use of the phrase "autonomous region of human experience" is somewhat troubling given Ibn 'Ata' Allah's, as well as many Islamic thinkers', insistence on *tawhid* underpinning creation's ontological existence, for a) if it was a region independent of creation's inherent contingency it would contradict the metaphysics of *tawhid* and b) many, if not most, Islamic thinkers would view their "religious experience" as resulting from the manner in which



reader to proceed with caution.<sup>81</sup> While these comments in no way invalidate the value of al-Taftazani's work, caution is necessary because a) the Sufi thinkers cannot be construed as presenting the views of modern rationalist psychologists, b) the manner in which the regime influences his manner of expression must be taken into account, and c) rather than representing his own views, especially given that he was the head of the Shadhiliyya in Egypt for a time, may have been written to increase the acceptance of Sufism within a regime that dismissed this mode of Islamic expression. Despite these cautions, his work, once translated, will be a welcome addition to the literature on Ibn 'Ata' Allah.

### Other Languages

As stated, the above is a sample of the available translations of Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works. It would take this work too far afield to detail all the currently available translations for, while the above deals primarily with European languages, Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works are available in Turkish, Malay, and Indonesian, name a few of the languages that have been left out. Nevertheless, of these other languages into which Ibn 'Ata' Allah's works have been translated, aside for general introductory comments, there does not seem to be an analysis of the interconnections of his oeuvre or a study of the worldview presented therein.

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they lived and thus cannot be divorced from that as a "region" autonomous or separate to the other aspects of their lives, for again this would contradict the ontological extension of the metaphysics of *tawhid*.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 184.

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