

THE NOTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MA'RIFA IN SUFISM

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At the heart of the Sufi notion of *ma'rifa* there lies a paradox that is as fruitful in spiritual terms as it is unfathomable on the purely mental plane: on the one hand, it is described as the highest knowledge to which the individual has access; but on the other, the ultimate content of this knowledge so radically transcends the individual that it comes to be described in terms of 'ignorance'. In one respect, it is said to be a light that illumines and clarifies, but in another respect its very brilliance dazzles, blinds, and ultimately extinguishes the one designated as a 'knower' (*al-ʿārif*).¹ This luminous knowledge that demands 'unknowing' is also a mode of being that demands effacement; and it is the conjunction between perfect knowledge and pure being that defines the ultimate degree of *ma'rifa*. Since such a conjunction is only perfectly realized in the undifferentiated unity of the Absolute, it follows that it can only be *through* the Absolute that the individual can have access to this ultimate degree of *ma'rifa*, thus becoming designated not as *al-ʿārif*, *tout court*, but as *al-ʿārif bi-Llāh*: the knower *through* God. The individual is thus seen as participating in Divine knowledge rather than possessing it, the attribute of knowledge pertaining in fact to God and not himself. In this light, the definition of *taṣawwuf* given by al-Junayd (d. 298/910) applies, a fortiori, to *ma'rifa*: '*Taṣawwuf* in essence is an attribute of God, but by image, it is an attribute of man.'²

This essay comprises three sections. The first will examine the appearance, within Sufism, of the notion of *ma'rifa* as distinctly spiritual knowledge in contrast to *ʿilm* as knowledge in the lower,

¹ One can translate this key term either as 'gnostic' or as 'knower'; while 'gnosis' as the translation of *ma'rifa* has the advantage—so long as it is shorn of its association with the Christian heresy of Gnosticism—of suggesting spiritual as opposed to conventional knowledge, 'knowledge' has the advantage that it can also be used as a verb, which brings it closer to the root of *ma'rifa*, which is *ʿarafa* 'he knew'.

² *Al-Junayd: Life, Personality and Writings*, ed. and trans. by A. H. Abdel-Kader (London: Luzac, 1962), 79.

rational sense of the term. The second will explore *ma'rifa* as a radically theocentric perspective, that is, an orientation towards the Divine as such; this perspective acquires its distinctiveness largely in relation to the lesser perspectives—of fear, asceticism, love, and so on—that it transcends. The third part focuses directly on the highest content of *ma'rifa* in terms of spiritual realization; this might be summed up as the plenary realization of the metaphysical, as opposed to simply theological, principle of *tawhīd*, oneness.³

MA'RIFA AS A NOTION IN CONTRAST TO 'ILM

It is important to begin this discussion of the rise of *ma'rifa* as a distinct concept within the Sufi tradition by stressing that the spiritual knowledge to which the notion refers is rooted in the essential sources of Islamic spirituality, namely the Qur'anic Revelation on the one hand, and the spiritual realization of the Prophet on the other.⁴ Even if the essence of this knowledge opens out onto the Divine itself, and thereby transcends the domain of the created order—and, thus, the temporal order within which the historical Revelation descended⁵—nonetheless, the true Sufis always

³ *Tawhīd*, as the verbal noun of the second form of the verb *wahada*, is more literally translated as 'making one'. At once complementing *and* transcending the theological process of making the object of worship 'one', the metaphysical mode of 'making one' involves the whole of existence. Thus the first testimony of Islam, 'there is no god but God' becomes, in the perspective of *ma'rifa*, 'there is no reality but the Real'. This will be more fully discussed in the final section.

⁴ Another definition of Sufism is again apposite here, in pointing to the full realization of the spiritual essence of the religion in the souls of the first great Muslims, despite the relatively undeveloped state of formal doctrinal articulation of this essence at this early period. The following is quoted by 'Alī al-Hujwīri (d. 456/1063) in his *Kashf al-mahjūb*, one of the most definitive of the classic manuals of early Sufism: 'Today, Sufism is a name without a reality; formerly it was a reality without a name' (*Kashf al-mahjūb*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1992), 44).

⁵ On the universality of sanctity (*walāya*) as opposed to the specificity of prophecy (*nubuwwa*), see Ibn al-'Arabī's position in D. Gril (trans.), 'Le Terme du voyage', ch. 6 of M. Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Les Illuminations de la Mecque* (Paris: Sindbad, 1988). In essence, the position can be summed up thus: while the consciousness of the saint *qua* saint is superior to that of the prophet *qua* prophet, nonetheless the sanctity of the prophet is greater than that of the saint. The source of the sanctity of the saint is the sanctity of the prophet, even if the universal consciousness opened up in sanctity transcends the specificities attendant upon the revelation of a Law for a particular community at a particular time. Also see, for a more extended treatment of sanctity in the writings of Ibn al-'Arabī, M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

saw themselves as 'inheritors' of a knowledge that was realized in all its plenitude by the Prophet. To think otherwise is to attribute a false originality to those Sufis who first articulated aspects of this knowledge in terms of *ma'rifa*; all they did was to give original expression to hitherto largely implicit concomitants of this knowledge, pathways to it, and conditions for it—bearing in mind that the knowledge in question remains inexpressible in its essence. This being so, *ma'rifa* can but be alluded to, or hinted at, in terms that are intended more as orientational points of reference for those actively engaged in a spiritual discipline, than as rationalistic doctrines claiming exhaustively to define and describe the knowledge in question. According to Ibn al-'Arabī, the spiritual states of the 'arif cannot be communicated to others; but they can be indicated symbolically 'to those who have begun to experience the like'.⁶

The term *ma'rifa* does not figure in the Qur'ān, 'ilm being the term used for knowledge; and *al-'Alīm*, the All-Knowing, is given as a Divine Name, whereas *al-'arif* is not. Likewise, in the Hadith literature, 'ilm greatly overshadows *ma'rifa*. In this regard, two points should be made: first, the notion of 'ilm in the first generations of Islam was flexible enough to encompass knowledge both of the contingent domain and the transcendent order. The concept of knowledge at this time, along with a range of other concepts, had a suppleness, a polyvalence, and a depth that was plumbed by the individual in the measure of his spiritual sensitivity: there was no need for a separate word to designate a specifically spiritual kind of knowledge.

Secondly, the Sufis who came to discuss *ma'rifa* as a distinct form of knowledge were able to quote and interpret certain key verses and *aḥādīth* as referring implicitly to the kind of knowledge they were seeking to elucidate.⁷ One verse of central importance in this connection is the following:

I created not the jinn and mankind except that they might worship Me. (51: 56)

⁶ *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, trans. by R. A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1978), 68.

⁷ Also, it was held that through *ma'rifa* the less obvious, underlying, and esoteric dimensions of scripture could be grasped. Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) writes that the inner meaning of many verses and *aḥādīth* can be understood only through *mukāshafa*, mystical unveiling; *mukāshafa* is closely connected with *ma'rifa*—sometimes being synonymous with it and at other times being a path leading to it as the final goal. See F. Jabre, *La Notion de la ma'rifa chez Ghazali* (Paris: Traditions des Lettres Orientales, 1958), 24–6.

In his *Kitāb al-Luma'*, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) in common with many other Sufis,⁸ reports the comment of Ibn 'Abbās: the word 'worship' here means 'knowledge' (*ma'rifa*), so that the phrase *illā li-ya'budūni* (except that they might worship Me) becomes *illā li-ya'rifūni* (except that they might know Me).⁹ The very purpose of the creation of man thus comes to be equated with that knowledge of God which constitutes the most profound form of worship. This view dovetails with the *ḥadīth qudsī*, (a holy utterance by God through the Prophet) so frequently cited by the Sufis: 'I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world.'

The word for 'known' here is *u'raf*: *ma'rifa* thus appears again here as the ultimate purpose of creation in general, a purpose which is realized—and mirrored—most perfectly through the sage who knows God through knowing himself. For, according to another much-stressed *ḥadīth*: 'Whoso knoweth himself knows his Lord'—again, the word for knowing is *'arafa*. We shall return to this altogether fundamental principle in the final section of this essay.

The question that presents itself at this point is why it should have been necessary for the Sufis to adopt the term *ma'rifa* in contradistinction to '*ilm*,¹⁰ a process that becomes visible from

⁸ e.g. Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* p. 267, and Qushayrī (d. 465/1074) in his famous *Risāla*, trans. by B. R. von Schlegel as *Principles of Sufism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1990), 316.

⁹ R. A. Nicholson (ed.), *Kitāb al-Luma'* (London: E. J. Gibb Memorial Series, 22, 1963), Arabic text, 40.

¹⁰ It would be wrong to say that this process was either uniform or unilateral. The two terms were frequently to be found as synonyms within Sufi texts; sometimes *ma'rifa* would be described as a form of '*ilm*, and vice versa; and there was no unanimity on the question of *ma'rifa* being superior to '*ilm*. See Kalābādhī's (d. 385/995) *Kitāb al-Ta'arruf li-madhbhab ahl al-taṣawwuf: The Doctrine of the Sufis*, trans. by A. J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), ch. 22, 'Their variance as to the nature of gnosis'. For the use of the two terms as synonyms, see Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz's (d. 286/899) *Kitāb al-Ṣidq: The Book of Truthfulness*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 49–50, Arabic text, 60. Also it should be noted that even the Sufi most frequently cited in connection with the first formal articulation of *ma'rifa*, Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859), speaks of the *ma'rifa* of the common folk, that of the '*ulamā*', and that of the saints. See Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson, (London: Luzac, 1905), part 1, Persian text 127. Finally, regarding the question of which is superior, *ma'rifa* or '*ilm*, Ibn al-'Arabī writes that the apparent disagreement is only a verbal one: it is the selfsame knowledge of the supernal verities that is in question, whether this be called *ma'rifa* or '*ilm*. See W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 149.

around the third/ninth century.¹¹ The answer to this question can be stated thus: it was in this period that various dimensions of the intellectual tradition of Islam—theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, to mention the most important—began to crystallize into distinct ‘sciences’ (*ulūm*)—each of which laid claim to ‘ilm as its preserve, thus imparting to ‘ilm its own particular accentuation and content.¹² What these disciplines had in common was a confinement of the notion of ‘ilm within the boundaries of formal, discursive, abstract processes of thought. For the Sufis to give the name ‘ilm to their direct, concrete, spiritual mode of knowledge was henceforth to risk associating the spiritual path of realization with a mental process of investigation.¹³ This is how Hujwīrī expresses the difference between the two types of knowledge:

the Sufi Shaykhs give the name of *ma'rifat* (gnosis) to every knowledge that is allied with (religious) practice and feeling (*ḥāl*)¹⁴ ... and the knower thereof they call ‘*ārīf*: On the other hand, they give the name of ‘ilm to every knowledge that is stripped of spiritual meaning and devoid of religious practice, and one who has such knowledge they call ‘*ālim*.¹⁵

In referring to the *ḥāl* or spiritual state that accompanies this higher knowledge, Hujwīrī draws attention to a dimension of consciousness deeper than the rational intellect; and one finds, parallel to this early shift of discourse from ‘ilm to *ma'rifa*, a corresponding shift of emphasis from the ‘*aql* ‘intellect’ to the *qalb* ‘heart’, as the seat

¹¹ One can find, prior to this time, scattered references to the term in a specifically Sufi context. For example: Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 160/777) is said to have developed the notion of *ma'rifa* (M. Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teachings of Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī* (London: Sheldon Press, 1935), 73. The lady Umm al-Dardā', a traditionist of the first century Hijra, was reported as saying, ‘The most excellent knowledge (‘ilm) is the gnosis (*al-ma'rifa*)’ (cited in Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 139).

¹² ‘The pre-emption by others of ‘ilm as a technical term prevented the Sufis permanently from selecting ‘ilm for employment as one of the numerous technical terms of their own vocabulary and from using it to designate by it one of their specific states and stations. Since *ma'rifa* and *yaqīn* lent themselves without much difficulty to doubling for ‘ilm, they were indeed widely substituted for it’ (ibid. 165).

¹³ See V. Danner, ‘The Early Development of Sufism’ in S. H. Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), i. 254.

¹⁴ This should be translated as ‘spiritual state’. The word ‘feeling’ is far too vague a translation of *ḥāl*.

¹⁵ *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, 382. Much the same is said by Qushayrī in his *Risāla*, in the chapter titled ‘*al-Ma'rifatu bi-Llāh*’, 316.

of spiritual awareness.¹⁶ In addition, the Divine Name *al-Haqq* is increasingly adopted as the most apt name by which to refer to God; combining the notions of reality and truth, it is *al-Haqq* that engages the consciousness of the *‘arif*. In other words, there is discernible here a threefold change of doctrinal exposition regarding knowledge: first, in the *nature* of knowledge itself, from discursive to spiritual; then in the *subject* of knowledge, from the mind to the heart; and finally in the *object* of knowledge, from discrete, formal data, to the essential principles of Reality as such.

Before turning to the pronouncements of Dhū l-Nūn and Abū Yazīd al-Bastāmī as exemplifying the perspective of *ma‘rifa* in this early period, it should be noted that in respect of all three elements in this new style of discourse, the influence of Ja‘far al-Šādiq is of great significance. It is important to bear in mind that in his time (d. 148/765) the Sunnī-Šhī‘ī division was not as rigid as it was later to become, and that he should not only be seen as the sixth Imam of Šhī‘ism, but also a ‘spiritual forebear’ of the Sufis.¹⁷ With regard to the concept of *ma‘rifa*, he imparted to it the important connection with the heart: ‘*Ma‘rifah qalbiyah* is possibly the most important concept both for the mysticism of the Sufis and for the imāmī doctrines of the Šhī‘īs.’¹⁸ And, as regards the name *al-Haqq*, Massignon argues, in his essay on the lexicography of Islamic mysticism, that it was from ‘the *tafsīr* of Ja‘far and the mystic circles of Kūfah that the term *al-ḥaqq* spread, through Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and others, to become the classic name for God in *taṣawwuf*.’¹⁹

¹⁶ This is not to say that the *‘aql* is always seen in this limitative sense; it can also designate consciousness as such, thus comprising not only both reason and intuition but also both the created intelligence and the uncreated intellect. See S. H. Nasr, ‘Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective’ in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 13/1–2 (Winter–Spring 1979), esp. 68–74. Moreover, there is nothing mutually exclusive about the terms *‘aql* and *qalb*, as the Qur’ān asks (22: 46): ‘Have they hearts (*qulūb*) wherewith to understand (*ya‘qilūna bihā*)?’

¹⁷ John Taylor, ‘Ja‘far al-Šādiq, Spiritual Forebear of the Sufis’, in *Islamic Culture* 11/2 (1966). Taylor notes that both Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī and ‘Aṭṭār put al-Šādiq at the head of their respective compendia of hagiographies.

¹⁸ Ibid. 109. *Ma‘rifa* is found in the later Šhī‘ī tradition referred to as *‘irfān*, which in fact came to stand for esoterism or essential *taṣawwuf* as such. See S. H. Nasr, ‘Šhī‘ism and Sufism: Their Relationship in Essence and History’ in *Sufi Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), esp. 118.

¹⁹ Cited in Taylor, ‘Ja‘far al-Šādiq’, 110. It should also be noted that Dhū l-Nūn made an edition of al-Šādiq’s esoteric commentary on the Qur’ān, which was to play a role of great significance in the unfolding of both the esoteric science of hermeneutics and Islamic spirituality generally, given the centrality of the Qur’ān therein: ‘it was al-Šādiq who played the most important role in the whole history of esoteric commentaries upon the Qur’ān in both its Šhī‘ite and Sufi facets.’ Abdurrahman

Another central aspect of *ma'rifa* that is found as part of al-Ṣādiq's legacy is the principle that only through God can God be known: 'Surely he alone knows God who knows Him by means of God (*bi-Llāh*). Therefore whoso knows Him not by means of Him knows Him not.'²⁰ He also expressed the ultimate subjective corollary of this mode of objective knowledge by stressing that none has the right to say 'I' but God: to Him alone is subjective reality fully attributable. This is expressed in the following commentary on the theophany witnessed by Moses on Mount Sinai:

It is not proper for anyone but God to speak of himself by using these words *innī anā*, 'I am I'. I [that is Moses, according to al-Ṣādiq's commentary] was seized by a stupor (*dahsh*) and annihilation (*fanā'*) took place. I said then: 'You! You are He who is and who will be eternally, and Moses has no place with You nor the audacity to speak, unless You let him subsist by your subsistence (*baqā'*).'²¹

Quite apart from its value in helping to explain the ecstatic utterances (*shathīyāt*) of the Sufis, such as al-Ḥallāj's 'I am the Truth' (*anā l-Ḥaqq*), these central aspects of spiritual knowledge clearly left their mark on the subsequent unfolding of Sufism in general, and the perspective of *ma'rifa* in particular. Dhū l-Nūn, who is generally credited with formulating for the first time the doctrine of *ma'rifa* in a distinctive fashion,²² clearly follows in the footsteps of al-Ṣādiq in his oft-quoted statement regarding *al-ma'rifa bi-Llāh*: 'I knew my Lord by my Lord; without my Lord I would not have known my Lord.'²³

Habil, 'Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran' in *Islamic Spirituality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), i. 29–30.

²⁰ Trans. by W. C. Chittick in *A Shi'ite Anthology* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1980), 43.

²¹ Quoted in C. W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 10. One finds an echo of this formulation in relation to the notion of *ma'rifa* in al-Kharrāz: 'Only God has the right to say "I". For whoever says "I" will not reach the level of gnosis.' Cited in A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 55. Also, al-Sarrāj, in the chapter on *tawḥīd* in his *Luma'*, makes the statement that none can say 'I' but God, adding that 'I-ness' (*al-annīyya*) pertains only to God (Arabic text, 32).

²² According to Massignon, Dhū l-Nūn was 'the first to isolate distinctly the notion of *ma'rifa*'. *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1954), 208. Annemarie Schimmel also points to Dhū l-Nūn as one of the original articulators of *ma'rifa* (*Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 6).

²³ Quoted in *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhu'l-Nun l'Egyptien*, 166. This is the translation by R. Deladrière of Ibn al-'Arabī's biography of Dhū l-Nūn, *al-Kawkab al-durrī fī manāqib Dhī'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī* (Paris: Sindbad, 1988).

Although in certain of Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī's formulations, the two notions of *ma'rifa* and 'ilm appear synonymous,²⁴ the difference between the two appears when he makes a dialectical contrast between the 'arif and the 'alim: 'The 'arif sees the *ma'rūf* ('the known', i.e. the Absolute) while the 'alim stays sitting with another 'alim; the 'alim asks, "What shall I do?", while the 'arif asks, "What will He do?"²⁵ Attention is thus drawn to the fact that the possessor of 'ilm is bound by the knowledge that defines him as the subjective agent, thus keeping him on the human plane, discoursing with other 'ulamā'; while the 'arif, on the contrary, attains a concrete vision of the supreme object of his *ma'rifa*: hence he is no longer preoccupied with his own acts, but with the acts of God, those manifestations of grace by which the 'arif is drawn ever closer to Him. The 'alim, meanwhile, is imprisoned within the delusion of autonomy and self-will—the inescapable concomitants of the notion that one is a 'knower' through one's own efforts; he thus continues to ask what he, as the agent, should do.

Moreover, according to Abū Yazīd, 'there is in 'ilm an 'ilm of which the 'ulamā' are ignorant.'²⁶ To know that God exists is a datum of which the 'ulamā' are aware; but to know this in depth means to know ultimately that God alone is, that all else is strictly nothing—it is of this knowledge that the 'ulamā' are ignorant. The 'arif, moreover, is one who knows not only that God's Reality infinitely transcends the world, but also that it mysteriously penetrates all things: 'For whomever is close to God (*al-Ḥaqq*), everything and every place is God, for God is everywhere and everything.'²⁷ But then there intervenes an 'ignorance' on a higher plane, for the knower

²⁴ Muhammad 'Abdur-Rabb argues that Abū Yazīd played an instrumental role not only in distinguishing between exoteric and esoteric knowledge, but also in formulating the doctrine of *ma'rifa*, saying that Dhū l-Nūn, his contemporary and friend, in fact learnt about *ma'rifa* from him. See his article, 'Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī's Contribution to the Development of Sufism', in *Iqbal Review*, 12/3 (1971), 58–9. The importance of Abū Yazīd in Sufism can be gauged by the fact that al-Junayd, himself a pivotal figure in the Sufi tradition, referred to him as being, in relation to the Sufis, what Gabriel is in relation to the angels ('Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, 135). We shall consequently be making considerable use of his sayings on *ma'rifa*, in particular those of his Persian sayings in 'Aṭṭār's *Tadhkirat*.

²⁵ Quoted in 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 163. (Persian text; this and all subsequent citations are my trans. from the Persian.)

²⁶ Ibid. 164. One is reminded here of al-Ṣādiq's formulation: 'Our cause is the Truth, and the Truth of the Truth (*ḥaqq al-ḥaqq*). It is the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and it is the esoteric of the exoteric (*bāṭin al-ẓāhir*), and it is the esoteric of the esoteric.' Quoted in Taylor, 'Ja'far al-Ṣādiq', 103.

²⁷ 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 165.

of the Truth ('*ārif-i Haqq*) is also the *jāhil* (an ignorant person).²⁸ This statement evokes the saying attributed to the first caliph of Islam, Abū Bakr: 'Glory be to Him who made the very incapacity to know Him to be the only path by which creatures may know Him.'²⁹ Since man as such cannot come to know God as such—the gulf between the created intelligence and the uncreated essence remaining forever unbridgeable—the one who claims to have knowledge of God is a 'pretender' (*mudda'ī*). Dhū l-Nūn states: 'Never pretend to possess *ma'rifat*'; and again, even more strongly: 'My greatest sin is my knowledge (*ma'rifat*) of Him.'³⁰

Niffarī, whose important book, the *Mawāqif*, is widely regarded as one of the most rigorously 'gnostic' of all Sufi texts, likewise refers to the 'gnosis of the gnoses' (*ma'rifatu l-ma'ārif*) in apophatic terms: it is, according to a divine inspiration, 'veritable ignorance of all things through Me'. He adds that the 'spring of knowledge' gushes forth from this ignorance, and 'whoso draws knowledge from the spring of knowledge draws knowledge and condition: but whoso draws knowledge from the flowing stream of knowledge ... will gain no constant knowledge.'³¹ What seems to be at issue here is the incommensurability between the essence of knowledge and the forms of its objects: in no way can this essence be equated with things that one can take as distinct forms of knowledge. If by 'knowledge' is meant taking cognisance of some object apart from itself, then the highest knowledge can only be termed an ignorance; on the other hand, if knowledge be defined exclusively in its most transcendent sense—that is, knowledge as such—then all other apparent modes of knowledge are themselves reduced to the status of ignorance. What these antinomian formulations seem to be alluding to is the fact that the '*ārif* is aware both that he 'knows' through God, and that, *qua* individual, he cannot know the essence of knowledge: the principle of consciousness cannot itself be made an object of consciousness;

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Quoted in Sarrāj, *Luma'* (Arabic text, 36). There is another version of this saying in Ibn al-'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (trans. as *The Bezels of Wisdom* by R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 65): 'knowledge of the incapacity to attain knowledge is knowledge'.

³⁰ 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 127. One is reminded here of the famous saying by the great saint Rābi'a al-'Adawīyya: 'Thine existence is a sin with which no other can be compared.' Quoted by M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), 125, n. 2.

³¹ *The Mawāqif and Makḥṭūbat of Muḥammad Ibn 'Abdū al-Jabbār al-Niffarī*, trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Gibb Memorial Series, 1935), no. 11, sections 1 and 6.

or again: that which encompasses all things cannot itself be encompassed.

It is evident, in this light, why bewilderment (*ḥayra*, *taḥayyur*) is said to be the mark of the highest sages. According to Dhū l-Nūn: 'Those who know God best are the most bewildered regarding Him.'³² On the one hand, then, the light of the sun of this knowledge dazzles and blinds, the closer one gets to it; but on the other hand, the resulting bewilderment does not prevent the 'ārif from seeing all things clearly by the light of the sun, and ultimately seeing the sun, but then only by its light, and not by one's own vision.³³

These points will be further discussed in the final section of the essay. For now, it suffices to note the significance of the rise of the notion of *ma'rifa* in the Sufi tradition; and to appreciate how certain Sufis in this early period used the limitative notion of 'ilm as a dialectical counterpoint, a rational foil, in relation to which the transcendent degrees of knowledge—and, very importantly, the path of spiritual discipline leading thereto—would stand out in sharp relief.

MA'RIFA AS A TRANSCENDENT PERSPECTIVE

One significant aspect of the perspective of *ma'rifa* is that it transcends limited, less complete, less essential perspectives, without necessarily abolishing them on the level to which they are proportioned. It is a perspective that relativizes all things in the face of the Absolute, but also—by that very fact—puts all things in their proper place, giving each thing its due. In other words, it 'goes beyond' but also 'returns'; it both surpasses and comprises. This dual function can be seen to operate in respect of the following elements of the Sufi tradition:

1. ascetic worship (*zuhd*/*ibāda*) according to the perspective of fear (*makhāfa*)
2. the perspective of love (*maḥabba*)
3. states (*aḥwāl*) and miraculous phenomena (*karāmāt*)

Ascetic worship

To say that the perspective of *ma'rifa* transcends lower perspectives is another way of asserting the primacy of divine grace over individual

³² Cited in Deladriere, *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhū'l-Nūn*, 166.

³³ Both aspects of this sun-image are found in Dhū l-Nūn's doctrine. See 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 127.

effort in the path of spiritual realization. Any religious outlook or orientation that comprises any implicit tendency to return to the individual ego as the preponderant agent in the spiritual endeavour is regarded as a subtle form of *shirk*, that is, polytheism or more literally, 'associationism': one is 'associating' the subjective ego with the objective Real. In this sense, *ma'rifa* might be said to be a perspective of radical objectivity, a perspective that is predicated entirely on the supreme Object, by whose grace, alone, perfect knowledge is consummated. It is for this reason that we find another great exponent of *ma'rifa* in the early period, al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī,³⁴ saying: 'Gnosis is a bounty which God gives to His servant when He opens for him the door of favour and grace, beginning without the servant's being worthy of that.'³⁵

The relative can never be said to be worthy of knowing the Absolute; no matter how much worship is offered, if the devotee is not aware of this fundamental truth, not even a lifetime of pious devotion will avail him in respect of the highest knowledge. His worship, in other words, becomes a veil obscuring the light of this knowledge. According to Abū Yazīd:

Three types of men are the most obscured from God: the scholar (*al-ʿālim*) by his erudition, the pious worshipper (*al-ʿābid*) by his piety, and the ascetic (*al-zāhid*) by his asceticism.³⁶

It is against the background of *zuhd* that the intellective character of *ma'rifa* stands out most sharply. Abū Yazīd calls the *zāhid* a mere 'traveller' (*sayyār*) while the 'ārif is a 'flyer' (*ṭayyār*).³⁷ Here, a step-by-step progression, in a horizontal dimension, by natural means, is

³⁴ It is *ma'rifa* that determines the entire structure of the stations of sanctity described by al-Tirmidhī in the doctrine of sanctity for which he is most renowned. See 'The Life of the Friends of God' trans. in B. Radtke and J. O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1996), esp. 40–53. Al-Tirmidhī gives a fascinating quasi-physiological account of the process by which *ma'rifa* is realized. According to him, *ma'rifa* is a divine light residing in the heart from pre-eternity. It is realized when its light shines from the heart (*qalb*) through to the breast (*ṣadr*) and is there recognized by the eye of the heart (*fu'ād*) and then the intellect (*ʿaql*); this takes place only when the lusts of the *nafs*—conceived as smoke welling up from the abdomen into the heart, thus obscuring the vision of the *fu'ād*—are overcome. See *ibid.* 46–51.

³⁵ Quoted in N. Heer, 'A Sufi Psychological Treatise', in *The Muslim World*, 51/1 (1961), 31.

³⁶ Quoted by S. Svirī, 'Hakīm Tirmidhī and the Malamati Movement in Early Sufism', in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *Classical Persian Sufism: From the Origins to Rumi* (London: Khaniqah Nimatullahi Publications, 1993), 600.

³⁷ 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 165.

contrasted with a sudden vertical ascent, a flight that is possible only by means of the grace of God.

Hārith al-Muḥāsibī refers to *ma'rifa* as 'a fathomless sea'; it is, he says, 'before all things and the origin of all things'.³⁸ In terms of this metaphor, the presumption of a man trying to attain to *ma'rifa* by his own efforts is analogous to his seeking to be one with the ocean by drinking it all up, rather than by being drowned in it.

Al-Muḥāsibī, despite being known principally for his method of critical self-examination (*muhāsaba*—whence his title), was very critical of those ascetics who became fixated in their practices. He condemned the fanatical excesses of a well-known category of recluses, describing the absurd lengths to which they went in their efforts to withdraw absolutely from the course of normal life. What he and others like him saw was that asceticism had come to be practised as an end in itself.³⁹ In other words, he wished to show the ascetics that any action that is centred on the individual stifles the liberating graces inherent in that knowledge which is centred on God.

Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) stands out as one of the greatest luminaries of *ma'rifa*. In his masterpiece, the *Hikam*,⁴⁰ he succinctly expresses the asymmetry between acts—ascetic or otherwise—and the grace of Divine Self-revelation that gives rise to *ma'rifa*:

If He opens a door for you thereby making Himself known, pay no heed if your deeds do not measure up to this ... Do you not know that He is the one who presented the knowledge of Himself (*ta'arruf*) to you, whereas you are the one who presented Him with deeds? What a difference between what he brings to you, and what you present to Him!⁴¹

This is not to say, of course, that all action is to be abandoned; for there are certain actions that predispose the soul to receive the grace of Self-revelation, and others that thicken the veils of ignorance. The principal positive act most strongly advocated by the 'arifūn is the invocation of the name of God (*dhikr Allāh*). In another *hikma*, Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh stresses the importance of maintaining the *dhikr*, and also reveals the relationship between invocation, the grace attracted

³⁸ Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, 98–101.

³⁹ Ibid. 50. He makes these criticisms in a work titled 'Treatise on Earning a Livelihood and Abstinence and Doubtful Things'.

⁴⁰ Trans. by V. Danner as *Sufi Aphorisms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973). As Danner says, the central theme of the book is *ma'rifa*. It is the 'inner thread' that holds together the 'jewels' that are the separate aphorisms in the book (p. 17).

⁴¹ Ibid. 24, no. 8.

thereby, and the realization of *tawhīd* (to which attention will turn in the next section):

Do not abandon the invocation because you do not feel the Presence of God therein. For your forgetfulness *of* the invocation of Him is worse than your forgetfulness *in* the invocation of Him. Perhaps he will take you from an invocation with forgetfulness (*ghafla*) to one with vigilance (*yaqaza*), and from one with vigilance to one with the Presence of God (*ḥudūr*), and from one with the Presence of God to one wherein everything but the Invoked (*al-Madhkūr*) is absent. 'And that is not difficult for God.'⁴²

To accomplish the invocation in the spirit of *ma'rifa* is to offer oneself to the grace of God, it is not reliance upon one's own actions; it is in relation to the one who accomplishes his invocation and other 'deeds' in the spirit of self-direction (*tadbīr*), with a view to appropriating to himself the anticipated fruits, that 'deeds' will not avail in respect of *ma'rifa*.

In connection with acts, the highest degrees of *ma'rifa* transcend the domain in which the polarity of good versus evil—and thus all virtues considered in their purely human aspect—has any reality. When asked regarding the Qur'ānic injunction to command the good and forbid the evil, Abū Yazīd answers thus: 'Be in a domain wherein commanding the good and forbidding of evil do not exist; for both of these exist in the province of the created order. In the Presence of Unity neither the one nor the other exists.'⁴³ This transcendence of virtues effected by the consciousness of the Divine Unity notwithstanding, human virtue is an absolute prerequisite for the rise of *ma'rifa*: in respect of integral knowledge it is a condition that is necessary, but not on its own sufficient. In a treatise titled *What the Seeker Needs*, Ibn al-'Arabī writes: 'Above all, what you need is high morals, good character, proper behaviour ...'.⁴⁴

Virtue is not only a condition for *ma'rifa*, it is also a consequence; for the 'arif comes to a realization of the divine qualities, appropriately transcribed and reflected, within his own soul. According to Dhū l-Nūn, the comportment of the 'arif towards others is like that

⁴² Ibid. 32, no. 47. The final quotation is from the Qur'ān, 14: 20. See also his entire volume devoted to invocation, *The Key of Salvation*, trans. Mary A. K. Danner (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996). Al-Ghazālī refers to invocation as one of the principal means of 'polishing the heart', rendering it capable of reflecting the verities of *ma'rifa*. See Jabre, *La Notion de la ma'rifa*, 18, 124.

⁴³ 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 168.

⁴⁴ *What the Seeker Needs*, trans. Shaikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi and Rabia Terri Harris al-Jerrahi (New York: Threshold Books, 1992), 8. Al-Ghazālī also stresses that without purity of soul there can be no *ma'rifa*. (Jabre, *La Notion de la ma'rifa*, 128).

of God: kind, supportive, generous, and so on, through the acquisition of the beautiful divine virtues (*takhalluqan bi-akhlāqi Llāhi l-jamīla*—a reference to the *ḥadīth* instructing the same).⁴⁵

Excessive asceticism, then, along with the perspective of fear to which it is attached, is surpassed in *maʿrifa*; but this does not mean that they are altogether excluded. One does not become an *ʿārif* by renouncing action and eschewing fear. On the contrary: fear of God is a necessary component of *maʿrifa*, even if it does not exhaust the contents of the *ʿārif*'s consciousness. *ʿAṭṭār* comments on Dhū l-Nūn's statement to the effect that the *ʿārif* has no attribute and yet can be described as one who fears (*khāʿif*) by saying that the one who has no fear can never be an *ʿārif*: the verse from the Qurʾān is also quoted: 'Only those of His slaves that are the knowers fear God.'⁴⁶

Hujwīrī expresses very well the perspective of *maʿrifa* in his remarks to one of the more extreme members of the group known as the Malāmātiyya. These were Sufis who deliberately acted in strange ways so as to provoke the blame of the orthodox; their aim was to eradicate in their souls all traces of ostentation and hypocrisy, that is, any inner desire to win praise from others. He reports the following conversation he had with one Malāmātī:

'O brother, what is your object in these perverse actions?' He replied: 'To make the people non-existent in regard to myself.' 'The people,' I said, 'are many, and during a lifetime you will not be able to make them non-existent in regard to yourself; rather make yourself non-existent in regard to the people ... If you wish no one to see you, do not see yourself. Since all your evils arise from seeing yourself, what business have you with others?'⁴⁷

From the viewpoint of *maʿrifa*, this preoccupation with one's secret imperfections crowds out the more important orientation one should have: that is, towards the perfection of God. Al-Tirmidhī expresses this in a letter to one of the leaders of the group, Abū ʿUthmān Saʿīd al-Nisāburī:

We have found that knowledge is of two kinds: knowledge of the soul ... and knowledge of God. If the servant keeps himself occupied in trying to know the defects, he will become involved throughout his life, and will always be attempting to get free. But if he occupies himself in pursuit of the knowledge of God, he will find this to be his cure, because this knowledge will revitalize his heart and mortify his carnal soul. If the soul is mortified through the suffusing divine brilliance, the heart will receive direct

⁴⁵ See Deladrière, *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhu'l-Nun*, 162.

⁴⁶ *ʿAṭṭār*, *Tadhkirat*, 127. The verse from the Qurʾān is 35: 28.

⁴⁷ *Kashf al-mahjūb*, 68.

revivifications from God; and what defect could possibly remain attached to him?⁴⁸

The perspective of love

Likewise, in respect of *maḥabba*, one finds that *ma'rifa* goes beyond it and also pre-eminently includes it: there is a simultaneous transcendence *and* a plenary realization of love of God. On the one hand, while the folk of love (*ahl al-maḥabba*) are considered to be those who seek the Beloved, the folk of gnosis (*ahl al-ma'rifa*) are themselves sought by the Beloved, in the contemplation of whose beauty they are submerged. His love for me, says Abū Yazīd, preceded mine for Him.⁴⁹ In other words, from the perspective of *ma'rifa*, the manifestation of human love for God is itself an effect of God's pre-existing and eternal love of man.

While the lovers contemplate the pleasures of Paradise as reward, the gnostics are engulfed in pure light, according to Abū Yazīd, who also asserts that a single grain of *ma'rifa* in the heart is better than a thousand palaces in Paradise.⁵⁰ This 'one grain' of true knowledge may be said to surpass paradisaic delights in the very measure that quality predominates over quantity: the uncreated essence of love, even if only glimpsed in the heart, immeasurably outweighs any number of its manifested—albeit heavenly—forms. It is not that the *'arif* eschews love; on the contrary, only the *'arif* has love in the fullest sense, given that 'only he can love God who knows Him', according to al-Ghazālī;⁵¹ and, if love increases in proportion to knowledge,⁵² he who knows God best loves Him most.

In practical terms, this love manifests itself as an imperturbable contentment (*riḍā'*) in all that life has to offer, insofar as everything that happens, good or evil, is an expression of the will of God. Since the *'arif* knows with certitude that God ultimately wills only what is best, he remains content in every state. Thus, according to

⁴⁸ Quoted in M. I. el-Geyoushi, 'The Influence of al-Tirmidhī on Sufi Thought' in *Islamic Quarterly*, 20–22/3 (1978), 105. Abū Yazīd likewise relates that one night he sought his own soul, only to hear a divine voice rebuke him in the morning: 'O Bāyazīd, are you seeking something other than Us? What business have you with the soul?' Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, 161.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 170.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 162.

⁵¹ Quoted in Hava Lazarus-Yafeh 'The Place of the Religious Commandments in the Philosophy of al-Ghazālī', in *The Muslim World*, 51/3 (1961), 176.

⁵² This is a logical corollary of the *ḥadīth qudsī* on God as the 'hidden treasure': for if God 'loved' to be known, the process of coming to know Him must likewise be accompanied by Divine love.

al-Muḥāsibī, worldly people react to affliction with impatience: afflictions will be for them punishments. Novices in the spiritual path react to affliction with patience: afflictions will be for them purification. While the *‘ārifūn* react to affliction with contentment: afflictions will be for them signs of their being chosen by God.⁵³

States and miraculous phenomena

Turning now to the question of mystical states, although in one respect *ma‘rifa* is itself sometimes viewed as a state, it is more often, and more essentially, regarded as a permanent awareness of God’s all-encompassing reality; an awareness that subsists as an undercurrent throughout all the experiences of life in the world. Thus, Dhū l-Nūn says that the true *‘ārif* ‘does not stay constantly in the same state, but he stays constantly with his Lord in all his states’. This is because, once the Real has been grasped aright, there is no need to depend on the continuation of specifically mystical ‘states’: what is real for us, he says, is *ma‘rifa* and the revelation (*kashf*) of knowledge ‘without this involving a *ḥāl*’.⁵⁴ Abū Madyan (d. 594/1198), another great representative of the *ma‘rifa* tradition, succinctly expresses the relative nature of mystical states:

[Spiritual] ‘states are masters for beginners because they determine their behaviour. But they are slaves for the advanced because they are under their control.’⁵⁵

Note that Abū Madyan does not deny the occurrence of mystical states, only that such states do not in any way destabilize the equilibrium of the *‘ārif*, an equilibrium produced by his knowledge of God. This is expressed by the idea of inward ecstasy coexisting with, rather than excluding, an outwardly sober comportment; the *‘ārif* in other words, transcends the state of *sukr* ‘drunkenness’, precisely by assimilating it within the station of *ṣaḥw* ‘sobriety’; for, while ecstatic states are transient phenomena, spiritual sobriety is rooted in the immutability of the supreme Object of knowledge.⁵⁶ Ibn ‘Aṭā’illāh explains this important aspect of *ma‘rifa* by referring to three classes of people; the first are heedless of God, while the second and third

⁵³ Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, 230–2.

⁵⁴ Deladrière, *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhū'l-Nun*, 165, 167.

⁵⁵ *The Way of Abū Madyan*, ed. and trans. by V. J. Cornell (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1996), 138, no. 113.

⁵⁶ ‘Ecstasy is akin to passing away (*zawāl*), while gnosis is stable and does not pass away’, an opinion recorded by al-Kalābādī, who then goes on to quote this verse from al-Junayd: ‘In ecstasy delighteth he who finds in it his rest: But when Truth cometh, ecstasy Itself is dispossessed’ (trans. Arberry, *Doctrine of the Sufis*, 106).

have spiritual knowledge. The person belonging to the second class is one who is

brought face to face with Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa*), the splendour of which is apparent to him. A traveller in the Path, he has mastered its extent, except that he is drowned in lights and does not perceive created things. His inebriety (*sukr*) prevails over his sobriety (*ṣaḥw*), his union (*jam'*) over his separation (*farq*), his extinction (*fanā'*) over his permanence (*baqā'*), and his absence (*ghayba*) over his presence (*ḥudūr*).⁵⁷

This might be seen as a more extensive description of the stage of the 'beginner' mentioned by Abū Madyan, one whose 'state' surpasses his 'station'. For his drunkenness in God prevails over his sobriety in the world, his inward sense of oneness with God prevails over his personal, existential separation from him, his extinction from his created being prevails over the subsistence of his personal identity, and his absence from the world prevails over his presence in it.

The more perfect sage, on the other hand, is one who

drinks, and increases in sobriety; he is absent, and increases in presence; his union does not veil him from his separation, nor does his separation veil him from his union; his extinction does not veil him from his permanence, nor does his permanence divert him from his extinction. He acts justly towards everyone and gives everyone his proper due.⁵⁷

This more complete knowledge simultaneously comprises two angles of vision—or dimensions of reality—the created and the uncreated, thereby giving each its 'due', without allowing the one to veil the other.

Turning briefly to the question of miraculous phenomena, Abū Madyan curtly sums up the attitude of the true 'arif:

When you see a man displaying evidence of miracles and paranormal abilities, do not be attracted to him; look instead at how he practices commanding [the good] and forbidding [evil].⁵⁸

Likewise, and with even more simplicity, Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh says, 'Sometimes a charisma (*karāma*) is bestowed upon someone whose righteousness (*istiḳāma*) is not perfect.'⁵⁹ Abū Yazīd says in the same vein: 'The saints do not rejoice at the answer to prayers which are the essence of miracles such as walking on water and moving in the air ... Let not anyone who is perplexed by such things put any faith in this trickery.'⁶⁰ This attitude seems to be based on his personal

⁵⁷ *Sufi Aphorisms*, 61–2.

⁵⁸ *The Way of Abū Madyan*, 146, no. 159.

⁵⁹ *Sufi Aphorisms*, p. 49, no. 179. For Ibn al-'Arabī, the greatest *karāma* is knowledge itself. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 148.

⁶⁰ Quoted in M. Smith, *Rabia the Mystic*, 31.

experience: for it was precisely by eschewing such phenomena that his own enlightenment arose:

During my novitiate, God used to bring before me wonders and miracles, but I paid no heed to them; and when He saw that I did so, He gave me the means of attaining knowledge of Himself.⁶¹

It is to the intrinsic aspects of this knowledge of God, as the supreme content of *ma'rifa*, that this discussion now turns.

SUPREME CONTENT OF MA'RIFA: KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S ONENESS

As one approaches the summit of *ma'rifa*, the elements of mystery, paradox, and bewilderment are sharpened. The inadequacy of words and formal thought is never felt more acutely than in the attempt to express the way in which knowledge of God is realized in the consciousness of the *'arif*. What needs to be stressed at the outset of this discussion is that no Sufi would ever regard it as possible to 'know' God as one 'knows' an object in the conventional cognitive sense. Only God knows God—this is frequently asserted by the Sufis. Only the infinite can 'know'—because it is—the infinite. The question then becomes: to what extent does the *'arif* realize identity of being with God, such that he can be said to 'know' God, not through himself, but through God?⁶²

One way of approaching this question is to focus on the spiritual, as opposed to simply theological, meaning of *tawhīd*. For while *tawhīd*, 'making one', on the theological plane means affirming that there is but one God as opposed to many gods, on the spiritual plane it means realizing that there is but one Reality. Attainment of identity with the sole Reality might be said to flow from this principal truth in the measure that the illusion of the autonomous existence of the world and the ego is concretely effaced. Thus, we have Ibn al-'Arabī saying that, 'The final end and ultimate return of the gnostics ... is that the Real is identical with them, while they do not exist.'⁶³

Dhū l-Nūn expresses this same principle, while elaborating on the aspect of identity. The *'arifūn*, he says, 'are not themselves, but in so

⁶¹ Quoted in R. A. Nicholson, *Mystics of Islam*, 131.

⁶² Ibn al-'Arabī speaks of two forms of *ma'rifa*: 'first, knowing Him as knowing yourself—this refers to the *ḥadīth* cited above, 'whoso knows himself knows his Lord'—and 'second, knowing Him through you as Him, not as you'. *Bezels of Wisdom*, 108.

⁶³ Quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 375.

far as they exist at all, they exist in God. Their movements are caused by God, and their words are the words of God ...'⁶⁴ He then cites the concluding part of a famous *ḥadīth qudsī*: 'When I love him (My slave), I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.'⁶⁵

The point that must be inferred from the above *ḥadīth* is that God does not 'become' identical to the slave: there is no change of location for God. Rather, what is revealed to the slave is a pre-existing, albeit hidden, identity. What appears from the individual and mystical point of view as a 'descent' of God is, from the objective and metaphysical point of view, the affirmation of an immutable reality, or, in the words of Ibn al-'Arabī, 'the extinction of that which never was ... and the subsistence of that which never ceased to be'.⁶⁶

This pre-existing identity is expressed in another *ḥadīth qudsī*, the importance of whose opening lines is stressed by the Emir 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'iri⁶⁷ as revealing the immanence of God's unique reality in all that exists: 'O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not ...'⁶⁸ This 'I' of God in each thing is the 'face' (*wajh*) of God (which is identified with the 'secret' (*sirr*)) of each thing, and which is referred to in the Qur'ān: 'Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God'. (2: 115) The Emir writes: 'he who looks with his face, that is to say, his secret, sees the face which God has in each thing; for in truth, only Allah sees Allah, only Allah knows Allah.'⁶⁹

Al-Ghazālī sheds further light on the meaning of the two aspects of all created things in reference to the verse: 'Everything perisheth except His Face' (88: 28), 'everything has two aspects, an aspect to itself and an aspect to its Lord: in respect of the first, it is Not-being; but in respect of the God-aspect, it is Being. Therefore, there is no Existent except God and the God-aspect ...'⁷⁰

Now it might be said that consciousness of the truth that there is no reality but the Divine Reality is itself constitutive of *ma'rifa*. The

⁶⁴ Quoted in M. Smith, *Readings*, nos. 20, 23–4.

⁶⁵ *Forty Ḥadīth Qudsī*, selected and trans. by E. Ibrahim and D. Johnson-Davies (Beirut/Damascus: Dar al-Koran al-Kareem, 1980), 104, no. 25.

⁶⁶ *Kitāb al-Fanā' fī l-mushāhada*, trans. by M. Valsan, *Le Livre de l'extinction dans la contemplation* (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Œuvre, 1984), 27–8.

⁶⁷ See *The Spiritual Writings of Amir 'Abd al-Kader*, 106, no. 23. This is the English trans. by J. Chrestensen *et al.*, of M. Chodkiewicz's French trans. of extracts from the *Mawāqif* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

⁶⁸ *Forty Ḥadīth Qudsī*, 88, no. 18.

⁶⁹ *Spiritual Writings*, 106.

⁷⁰ *Al-Ghazzālī's Mishkāt al-anwār* ('The Niche for Lights'), trans. W. H. T. Gairdner (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1988), 59.

extent to which this truth is realized in depth will then be the criterion of the degree of *maʿrifa* attained.⁷¹ For one can have a notional or purely mental understanding of this truth, a firm belief in it in principle, an inkling or ‘taste’ (*dhawq*) of its spiritual reality—derived from the first glimmerings of realization in the heart⁷²—or else its plenary realization, which demands a concrete knowledge of one’s own nothingness in the face of this Reality. Now, to speak of this knowledge of one’s own nothingness leads to the discussion of the state of *fanāʾ* in relation to *maʿrifa*. For it is in this state that the individual may be said, paradoxically, to realize ‘fully’ his nothingness.⁷³

Al-Ghazālī distinguishes between, on the one hand, gnostic sciences (*maʿārif*, sing. *maʿrifa*) that are revealed only in the state of *fanāʾ*⁷⁴ and, on the other, the revelation of the sole reality of God that comes about in the state of *fanāʾ*.⁷⁵ It is the latter mode of extinction that concerns us here, for it is from this state that derive the famous expressions of complete identity such as Abū Yazīd’s ‘Glory be to me!’ and al-Ḥallāj’s ‘I am the Truth’; and, as mentioned above, it is identity, alone, that justifies the proposition that the individual can participate in God’s Self-knowledge, such that he can come to know God *through* God.

Now, while al-Ghazālī says that these words of lovers must be ‘hidden away and not spoken of’, he nonetheless affirms the reality of the absolute oneness of God that is revealed in the state of *fanāʾ*:

They were drowned in the absolute Unitude, and their intelligences were lost in Its abyss ... there remained nothing with them save Allah ... when this

⁷¹ The notion that *maʿrifa* has degrees is expressed by al-Ghazālī as follows: ‘to whatever extent the heart is cleansed and made to face the truth, to that extent will it reflect His reality.’ *The Book of Knowledge*, trans. N. A. Faris (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1966), 49. Also significant is what Niffarī says (*Mawāqif*, 9: 6, 38): ‘Everything that concentrates thee on gnosis belongs to gnosis.’

⁷² Recalling the words of Ibn al-ʿArabī cited above: the ‘*arīfūn* can impart their states only to those who have *begun* to experience the like.

⁷³ In a discussion of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* in the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī expresses well the mysterious incommensurability between the verbal expression and the intrinsic reality of *fanāʾ* by referring to the simple sentence: Zayd died (*māta Zayd*): ‘if Zayd is the agent [grammatical subject] (*fāʿil*) [yet] he is not the agent, for he is defunct (‘*ātil*). He is the agent [only] in respect of the grammatical expression; otherwise he is the acted upon (*mafʿūl*), and Death is his slayer.’ R. A. Nicholson’s trans. (London: Luzac, 1930), vol. 4, book 3, 3683–4.

⁷⁴ He answers the question—‘Why are these *maʿārif* revealed through *mukāshafa* only in a state of *fanāʾ*?’—by saying that the operations of the individual faculties act as obstacles to this mode of inspired disclosure, being tied to the sensible world, which is ‘a world of error and illusion’. See no. 56 of his treatise *al-Arbaʿīn*, quoted in Jabre, *La Notion de la maʿrifa*, 124.

⁷⁵ *Iḥyāʾ*, II, 257; quoted *ibid.* 65.

state prevails, it is called in relation to him who experiences it, Extinction, nay, Extinction of Extinction, for the soul has become extinct to itself, extinct to its own extinction; for it becomes unconscious of itself and unconscious of its own unconsciousness, since, were it conscious of its own unconsciousness, it would be conscious of itself.⁷⁶

He concludes the discussion by saying that the state is called *ittihād* ('union') 'in the language of metaphor'; and *tauhīd* ('making one') 'in the language of reality'.⁷⁷ There is a subtle linguistic difference here which expresses a distinction of fundamental importance: what appears from the mystical point of view as a merging of two previously distinct entities, the soul and God, is in fact, from the viewpoint of 'reality', the revelation of a oneness that brooks no alterity. 'Making one' means giving the unique reality of God its full due, recalling here the verse (6: 91) with which al-Qushayrī introduces his chapter on *ma'rifa* in the *Risāla*:⁷⁸ 'They have not reckoned God at His true worth.'

As for the verbal expressions of identity in this state, from the point of view of *ma'rifa*, the 'I' in question is never that of the individual, but always that of God. Thus we find al-Junayd explaining Abū Yazīd's utterance 'Glory to me!' (*subhānī*) as follows: 'The one who is annihilated in the vision of glory expresses himself according to what annihilates him.'⁷⁹ The remarks of the Shaykh al-'Alawī in this connection should also be carefully noted: 'Extinction and submersion and annihilation come suddenly upon the Gnostic, so that he goeth out from the sphere of sense and loseth all consciousness of himself, leaving behind all his perceptions, nay his very existence. Now this annihilation is in the Essence of the Truth, for there floweth down over him from the Holiness of the Divinity a flood which compelleth him to see himself as the Truth's Very Self in virtue of his effacement and annihilation therein.'⁸⁰

But the question now arises, at least from the discursive and logical point of view: how can the individual, as such, be said to 'know' anything at all when his specific identity and relative consciousness

⁷⁶ *Mishkāt al-anwār*, 60, 61.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 61. I have not followed Gairdner's trans. of these two terms as 'identity' and 'unification', respectively.

⁷⁸ See the trans. by von Schlegel, *Principles of Sufism*.

⁷⁹ Quoted in M. 'Abdur-Rabb, 'al-Bastamī's Contribution', 56. This point is made with great force and beauty in a story in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* about Abū Yazīd: he tells his disciples to kill him if he utters again any blasphemous claims about being one with God; he again succumbs to the unitive state, and utters his famous words, but when they try to kill him, they only succeed in stabbing themselves, as 'he' is no longer there. Nicholson's trans., vol. 4, 2102–40.

⁸⁰ Quoted in M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint*, 163.

are utterly effaced; when he is not even ‘conscious of his own unconsciousness’? On the one hand, this is a paradox that explains why it is that Dhū l-Nūn, and many others, have said that those who know God best are those who are most bewildered in regard to Him.⁸¹ It is precisely because the ‘*ārif*’ is no longer himself in this supreme state that it is said that God’s Essence cannot be ‘known’, even in this state. On the other hand, it can be said that this supreme knowledge is realized in the innermost consciousness of the ‘*ārif*’—that is, at a point of pure consciousness that is *in* the soul, but not *of* it.⁸² This is another way of saying that it is God who knows Himself *through* the ‘*ārif*’. In this connection it is worth recalling that the very purpose of creation, according to the *ḥadīth* of the ‘hidden treasure’ cited above, is that God should be ‘known’. Now, while the whole of the created order makes ‘known’, by manifesting, aspects of the hidden treasure, it is in man alone that God realizes a mode of Self-knowledge that is distinct both from this process of manifestation that constitutes Self-objectivation, and from His eternal knowledge of Himself in Himself, apart from all manifestation; for, as Ibn al-‘Arabī says in his chapter on Adam in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*: God wanted to see His own Essence ‘in an all-inclusive object encompassing the whole [divine] Command, which, qualified by existence, would reveal to Him His own mystery. For the seeing of a thing, itself by itself, is not the same as its seeing itself in another, as it were in a mirror ...’⁸³

Continuing this effort at expressing in symbolic terms that which clearly transcends the domain of reason, it might be said that it is the return of the Divine ray of consciousness—immanent in, but not belonging to, the soul—back to the source of its projection, that constitutes the consummation of this mode of Divine Self-knowledge starting from relativity.⁸⁴ One might say—always bearing in mind the gulf that separates all such images from the ultimately inexpressible nature of spiritual realization—that this mode of knowledge is akin to a ray of sunlight returning to the sun: this ray is distinct from the sun in one respect, but, in another respect, its substance is none other than that of the source of its projection.

⁸¹ Quoted in Deladrière, *La Vie merveilleuse de Dhū'l-Nun*, 166.

⁸² We are applying here a well-known definition of Sufism: to be in the world but not of it.

⁸³ *Bezels of Wisdom*, 50.

⁸⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī writes elsewhere of the vision of the Real in terms of light: ‘The object of vision, which is the Real, is light, while that through which the perceiver perceives Him is light. Hence light becomes included within light. *It is as if it returns to the root from which it became manifest*. So nothing sees Him but He. You, in respect of your entity are identical with shadow, not light’ (emphasis added). Quoted in Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 215.

It might still be objected, however, that the individual as such can have no share in this knowledge by which God knows Himself through him; for this Divine Self-knowledge would appear to pertain exclusively to different aspects of God, and hence something to which the created intelligence of man has no access. One way of responding to this objection would be, first, to recall our application of al-Junayd's definition of Sufism to *ma'rifa*: knowledge is in essence a divine attribute; only by image is it an attribute of man. Then, on this basis, one can assert that the knowledge of God that can be attributed to the 'arif is an image, or a reflection, on the plane of refraction constituted by the individual intellect, of that Divine Self-knowledge which is realized within him; this Self-knowledge being consummated at that point of pure, uncreated consciousness that furnishes the individual's innermost reality, his *sirr* or deepest identity.⁸⁵ Thus, the reality of God's Self-knowledge through the 'arif is inversely reflected, within relativity, by the latter's knowledge 'through God': this image, trace, or imprint of the supreme knowledge is sufficient ontological—rather than simply logical or notional—evidence of the sole reality of God. For, again, if the image is in one sense incommensurable with that of which it is an image, in another respect, it is not other than the reality which it transcribes in relative mode.⁸⁶

To 'know oneself' is thus to know what resides in the essence of one's own soul: the uncreated 'spark' or 'ray' or 'face' of Divine consciousness that realizes its plenary nature in the return to its source. To know this—spiritually and not just theoretically—is to know 'one's Lord' for the 'arif can be said to know through God—through the reflected image of God's Self-knowledge—first, that God alone is absolutely Real, and that he, in the face of this reality, has no real existence, whether in or out of the state of *fanā*'; secondly, that, insofar as he possesses a degree of existence, it cannot pertain to him as an individual but to God as the unique, inassociable Reality. We thus return to Ibn al-'Arabī's definition of the 'final end and ultimate return' of the 'arifūn: 'The Real is identical with them, while they do not exist.'

According to Ibn al-'Arabī, there are two crucial existential concomitants of this highest knowledge, and it is with these that this

⁸⁵ Hence the sentence frequently cited in Sufi literature: the Sufi is uncreated (*al-ṣūfī lam yukhlaq*).

⁸⁶ I have developed these ideas further, in comparative context, in a forthcoming publication: *Paths to Transcendence: An Analysis of Transcendent Realization in Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (New York: State University of New York Press). See esp. ch. 5, part 2, section 6, 'Agency in Transcendent Realization'.

essay will be concluded. On the one hand, there is the perfect realization by the *'arif* of servitude (*'ubūdiyya*) towards God; and on the other he is witness to a perpetual theophany in the world of phenomena around him.

The reason why the realized *'arif* is also the perfect slave of God is twofold. First, because he knows that he is nothing in the face of the Real: he may thus be said to have assimilated an 'ontological' humility; that is, a humility that transcribes in personal and existential terms the knowledge consummated at the supra-personal degree of pure Being. Henceforth, the soul of the *'arif* is penetrated by humility. Secondly, he is the perfect slave of God because he knows that, as an individual, his immutable attribute is servitude—notwithstanding his knowledge of his innermost identity, revealed in all its plenitude in the unitive state. In other words, the passing state of *fanā'* is, from the strictly human point of view, subordinated to the immutable station of *baqā'*, subsistence:

Subsistence is a relationship that does not disappear or change. Its property is immutably fixed in both the Real and the creature. But annihilation is a relationship that disappears. It is an attribute of engendered existence and does not touch upon the Presence of the Real.⁸⁷

When annihilation is viewed as a particular state, it is situated within the framework of 'engendered existence'; moreover, it is something which is transient within this relative framework. It is in this respect that it 'does not touch upon the Presence of the Real': only that which is immutable can be called real. Thus, it is the permanence of slavehood, rather than the passing state of annihilation, that faithfully reflects, within relativity, the eternity of the Divine Reality, even if the intrinsic content of the state of annihilation directly pertains to the transcendent order. It is in this sense that the *'arif* may be said to 'go beyond' all mystical states, even while assimilating the knowledge of ultimate Reality revealed in these states. We thus return to Abū Madyan's description of the 'advanced' mystic: the one who is master of his states, rather than their slave. It is also worth recalling what was said by Dhū l-Nūn: the true *'arif* does not stay constantly in the same state, but he stays constantly with his Lord in all his states.

The permanent awareness of Divine Reality in the midst of the normal course of life thus takes precedence over particular, transient states; and hand in hand with this permanent consciousness of the Real goes an equally permanent awareness of one's servitude to God, a servitude that remains for as long as the individual as such subsists. The slave, in other words, always remains the slave, his existence

⁸⁷ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 321.

'is immutable in its servitude'.⁸⁸ Each aspect of existence is put in its right place: the aspect of inmost consciousness of identity with the Real does not contradict the concrete obligations of the slave towards God as his Lord and Creator; and inversely. It might be said, in fact, that reverence and devotion to the Lord are deepened in the measure that knowledge of His sole Reality is attained.

Turning to the second fundamental aspect of the highest knowledge—the witnessing of a perpetual theophany—what must be stressed is that, having realized God in supra-manifest mode, the perfect *'arif* is one who cannot but see Him continuously through and in all the modalities of manifestation; having 'climbed up to the Real' the *'arif* comes to know God in His aspect of transcendence, since 'the Real discloses Himself to him without any substratum'; then knowledge of Divine immanence in the substrata will flow forth as a natural consequence. He who has 'seen' the One *above* all things will see the same One—*mutatis mutandis*—in all things:

When this servant returns ... to his own world, the world of substrata, the Real's self-disclosure accompanies him. Hence he does not enter a single presence which possesses a property without seeing that the Real has transmuted Himself in keeping with the property of the presence ... after this he is never ignorant of Him or veiled from Him ...⁸⁹

This witnessing of God in all things is the positive complement, in terms of consciousness, of the essential poverty of the *'arif* in terms of being: although he knows concretely that he is nothing before God, his very consciousness of the reality of God's inescapable presence means that he is also witness to a perpetual theophany:

The Real is perpetually in a state of 'union' with engendered existence. Through this he is a god. This is indicated by His words, 'He is with you wherever you are' (Qur'ān, 57: 4); and it is the witnessing of this 'withness' that is called 'union' (*waṣl*), insofar as the gnostic has become joined (*ittiṣāl*) to witnessing the actual situation.⁹⁰

It should be noted here that this mode of union is related to the Divine, not in its Essence, but insofar as It has 'descended' as a 'god' in the forms of His Self-manifestations, that is, the cosmos in its entirety. 'Union' upon this plane is thus to be distinguished from the state of union or identity spoken of above, even though it is in the light of the latter—the knowledge through God—that this witnessing of the Divine 'withness' is fully attained. One should recall here the *ḥadīth qudsī* identifying God with the very faculties

⁸⁸ Quoted *ibid.* 321.

⁸⁹ Quoted *ibid.* 185.

⁹⁰ Quoted *ibid.* 365.

of the slave whom He loves: it is, even in respect of relative consciousness on the plane of phenomenal existence, only God who 'sees' God: only the divine 'face' within the human faculties—sensible and intellectual—can grasp the divine 'face' in the created objects and phenomena in the world.

In the chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ* on the prophet Elias, emphasis is put on the 'completeness' of *ma'rifa*; this requires that God be known both above and within all things. Those who 'return' to phenomenal existence with a transformed awareness thereof, are deemed to possess a greater plenitude than those who 'remain' in the state of ecstatic extinction in God.⁹¹ This is the message received by Ibn al-'Arabī from the prophet Aaron in the course of his own spiritual ascent through the heavens: those who remain unaware of the world are said to be 'lacking' in respect of the totality of the Real inasmuch as the world—assimilated as an aspect of this very totality—was veiled from them. This is because the world is 'precisely the Self-manifestation of the Truly Real, for whoever really knows the Truly Real'.⁹²

The world, in other words, is not just reduced to the status of illusion before the transcendent reality of God; it is also grasped by the 'arif *bi-Llāh* as the manifestation of God: God's transcendence above all things does not veil the 'arif from His immanence in all things, and inversely.

It might be said, in conclusion, that it is the perfect combination of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* that defines the integral perspective of *ma'rifa* that we have attempted to outline in this essay. For a unilateral stress on *tashbīh* invariably leads to the error of a horizontal reductionism, objectively, and an accompanying crude form of self-deification, subjectively: on the one hand, God will be identified with the sum total of created things; and, on the other, the mystery of God's presence in the transpersonal depth of consciousness will be appropriated by and appended to the personal ego.

A unilateral stress on *tanzīh*, for its part, entails an implicit polytheism: for if God's Reality is cut off completely from the world, the world must be attributed with an autonomous existence, whence

⁹¹ Ibn al-'Arabī distinguishes between those 'sent back' (*mardūdūn*) and those 'absorbed' or effaced (*mustablikūn*); the former are deemed 'more perfect' and are in turn sub-divided into those who return only to themselves, and those who return with the mandate to guide others to the Truth, these being the higher of the two. See R. T. Harris, *Journey to the Lord of Power* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 51.

⁹² Quoted in J. W. Morris 'Ibn al-'Arabī's Spiritual Ascension', in Chodkiewicz, *Illuminations*, 374.

the positing of two realities, and, in the last analysis, two absolutes. God is not only the Sublime (*al-'Alī*), He is also the All-encompassing (*al-Muḥīṭ*): He infinitely transcends all things, but, at the same time, nothing that exists can be definitively excluded from His unique Reality.

This doctrine is beautifully expressed in the famous poem by Hātif Isfahānī, the *Tarjī'-Band*, at the end of which the mysteries of *ma'rifa* are directly broached:

O Hātif, the meaning of the Gnostics, whom they sometimes call drunk and sometimes sober,
 [When they speak] of the Wine, the Cup, the Minstrel, the Cup-bearer, the Magian, the Temple, the Beauty and the Girdle,
 Are those hidden secrets which they sometimes declare in cryptic utterance.
 If thou shouldst find thy way to their secret thou wilt discover that even this is the secret of those mysteries,
 'He is One and there is naught but He:
 There is no God save him alone!'⁹³
 [ke yekī ast-o hīch nīst juz'ū
 waḥdahū lā ilāha illā hū]

⁹³ *The Tarjī'-Band of Hatif*, trans. E. G. Browne (Tehran: Farhang-Sara, 1367 AH), 26.