

# Letters of a Sufi Scholar

The Correspondence of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī  
(1641-1731)

*By*  
Samer Akkach



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## CONTENT AND SIGNIFICANCE

The letters of the *Wasā'il al-Taḥqīq wa Rasā'il al-Tawfīq* vary in length and content but are similar in style. The early letters are longer and thematically specific, whereas the later letters are shorter and general in nature. There are three lengthy letters that were written more as epistles, or treatises, and were given specific titles. The first of these, “Thubūt al-Qadamayn fī Su'āl al-Malakayn” (letter 1), is on faith and belief; the second, “Lamḥat al-Alṭāf wa Ḥaḍrat al-Ithāf” (letter 3), is on personal struggle and the symbolism of war; and the third, “Taḥrīk Silsilat al-Widād fī Mas'ilat Khalq Af'āl al-'Ibād” (letter 4), is on free will and God's role in natural causes and human actions. In addition to these three lengthy epistles, letter 14 had a lengthy attachment that was not included in the *Wasā'il*; it is on the nature of the unseen and spiritual knowledge and is titled “Raf' al-Rayb 'an Ḥaḍrat al-Ghayb.” It is not clear why 'Abd al-Ghanī did not include this epistle in the *Wasā'il* when he did include the epistles that comprised letters 1, 3, and 4. However, manuscript copies of this epistle can be accessed at the national library of Damascus. I have included it in my thematic discussion of letter 14 because I considered it to be an integral part of 'Abd al-Ghanī's correspondence and of a similar magnitude to the first three epistles. In addition to these four lengthy, theoretical, and thematically specific epistles, 'Abd al-Ghanī's lengthy exchange with Aḥmad al-Kasbī on cosmogony and the Unity of Being (letters 61 and 62) are also thematically specific, complex, and profound.

Letters 6 and 10 refer to the practice of solitude (*khalwa*), shedding light on an important, yet often misrepresented, phase of 'Abd al-Ghanī's life and spiritual experience, while letter 25 refers to smoking, then a new social habit that was spreading rapidly and causing much controversy and social unrest. Because of their thematic significance, the contents of these selected letters are discussed in detail below, followed by a concluding overview of the common themes of the *Wasā'il*: piety, spirituality, and religious ethics.

Regarding 'Abd al-Ghanī's style of writing and the linguistic quality of his text, notwithstanding the frequent use of rhymed prose, which was common in traditional literary works, the letters are written in a formal style closer in its idioms and structure to modern than to tra-

ditional Arabic. 'Abd al-Ghanī's writing, in general, is clear, lucid, well structured, and easy to follow, even when he is dealing with complex or esoteric topics. The precision and sophistication of his terms, expressions, analyses, and analogies, both linguistically and conceptually, are remarkable, and so are the breadth of his knowledge and his ability to communicate to audiences of varying preoccupations and intellectual capacities, including his correspondents, the wider community, and even the succeeding generations to whom he alludes in his preface to the *Wasā'il*.

In the following presentation of specific letters, unattributed quotes refer to the letter being discussed.

*On Understanding Islam: Letter 1*

The first letter of the *Wasā'il* is addressed to shaykh Ramaḍān of Antep, now in Turkey. The thirty-five-year-old 'Abd al-Ghanī presents his friend with some advice on piety and religious ethics. The introductory notes suggest that 'Abd al-Ghanī had met shaykh Ramaḍān, become his friend, and exchanged visits with him while the latter was staying in Damascus. 'Abd al-Ghanī was prompted to correspond with shaykh Ramaḍān by what he had heard about his preoccupation with “providing religious advice to the brothers, of the unitarians” (*bi-munāṣḥat al-ikhwān min al-muwaḥḥidīn*). From the content of the letter, it is not clear whether shaykh Ramaḍān was a professional mosque preacher, a cleric, or just an ordinary pious man trying to spread good words about the Islamic faith. Nor is it clear whether the term *muwaḥḥidīn* (unitarians) refers generally to believing Muslims or specifically to a particular group with mystical tendencies who believed in the Unity of Being, for example. Elsewhere in the letter, 'Abd al-Ghanī refers to “the faithful unitarian” (*al-mu'min al-muwaḥḥid*), in the sense of a devout believer. The term makes better sense when juxtaposed against the concept of “hidden polytheism” (*al-shirk al-khafī*), which he alluded to in a hermeneutical treatise he had written only a few months before this letter, and elaborated further in a commentary on shaykh Arslān's treatise on unity, completed three years later.<sup>1</sup> Whatever he may have meant, 'Abd al-Ghanī introduces his letter with general advice to shaykh Ramaḍān, enjoining him to remain strict in observing religious duties, and be fully devoted to his task of guiding people without fearing their rejection or being distracted by worldly concerns.

After some introductory remarks on the ethics of preaching, 'Abd al-Ghanī dwells on the fundamental issues of faith and belief through a rationalisation of the Islamic concept of the “grave trial,” which involves the first assessment all Muslims undergo upon their death. According to a reported prophetic tradition, two angels named Munkir and Nakīr are assigned to question the newly dead in their graves about essential matters of faith, in order to test their belief and religious understanding. It is the first station of assessment before the final judgement on the day of reckoning. These are the “two angels” 'Abd

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<sup>1</sup> The first treatise is *al-Fatḥ al-Rabbānī*, the second (the commentary) is *Khamrat al-Ḥān*; see the list of Primary Arabic Sources Cited for details.

al-Ghanī refers to as *al-Malakayn* in the title of this letter, “The Firmness of the two Feet in the Questioning of the two Angels” (“Thubūt al-Qadamayn fi Su’al al-Malakayn”).

According to the prophetic tradition, the angels will ask three questions: Who is your Lord? Who is your Prophet? And what is your religion? ‘Abd al-Ghanī uses the *ḥadīth* to lay down the proper understanding of the fundamental articles of faith. Since everyone knows that the angels’ questioning is inevitable, he advises shaykh Ramaḍān to teach his community the answers to the three questions, and to encourage them to prepare well by telling them, “If you do not listen to me now, while I am of your kind, and you have space to learn the answers and time from me to prepare, you will hear the same from two stringent and unfriendly [beings] who will not be patient with you, not for an hour, nor even for a fleeting moment. So think what you want to do.” He asks shaykh Ramaḍān to articulate the answers provided in the letter in his own language (Ottoman Turkish) in order for his audience to understand them profoundly. For the meaning should “inhere in their spirituality,” ‘Abd al-Ghanī explains, “in order for them to benefit from that [knowledge] in the grave’s world, because in that world the souls will speak with what they have; they cannot do otherwise. Memorising through the tongue will not help in that world, because, with the discontinuity from the current world, judging by the outer [deeds] will cease; only judging by the inner [beliefs] will persist.”

‘Abd al-Ghanī uses the three questions from the two angels to articulate his view of the core elements of the Islamic faith and to construct a general framework for true belief in God, the Prophet, and Islam. His sophisticated articulation goes way beyond the commonly known basics, such as the testimony and the other four pillars of Islam. In fact he does not even mention those. Instead, he tries to search for the inner challenge concealed in each question. The challenge in the first question, who is your Lord? lies in the fact that no-one knows the Lord. “The Lord worshiped by communities of believers, no-one knows him,” he writes, “nor can anyone ever know him except with reference to a particular state or degree, but not with reference to inner reality and essence.” For these are inaccessible by the human mind. Thus, the question becomes one of understanding being (*wujūd*), and its states and hierarchy, within the framework of which a relationship between the creator and the creature can be articulated and a way of knowing the Lord may be reached.

The challenge in the second question, who is your prophet? lies in understanding the nature of prophecy, which hinges on the belief in the unseen that exposes the supra-rational aspects of faith. For ‘Abd al-Ghanī the main reason for asking this question is not to know whether one is a follower of Muḥammad, Christ, Moses, or other prophets, but to see whether one understands the true nature of prophecy. Thus, as with his take on the previous question, ‘Abd al-Ghanī tends to focus on the universal realities that relate to all religions and not just to Islam, although his articulation is naturally grounded in Islamic ideas and presented from an Islamic perspective. “Know, O my brother, that believing in prophecy is believing in the unseen,” he writes. This is so for those “with proper reason,” he adds, and even for the companions who saw the Prophet, “because they saw only his outward [form], yet they believed in his inner [reality], having faith in the unseen. They themselves were not prophets to have access to the unseen, and so there is no difference between them and us except with regard to their seeing the visible form of the Prophet.”

Understanding the nature of prophecy, ‘Abd al-Ghanī argues, presupposes an understanding of the hierarchy of believers and their corresponding phases of belief. He identifies three phases (*aṭwār*) of spiritual growth: faith (*īmān*), sainthood (*wilāyā*), and prophecy (*nubuwwa*). Faith is the general phase of all believers; sainthood is a phase restricted to the elite; while prophecy is a phase for the divinely chosen ones. The difference between the levels of knowledge in these phases, he explains, is similar to the difference between the mental capacity and understanding of a child, an adolescent, and a mature adult. Just as there is a natural progression and expansion in one’s knowledge from childhood to maturity, so likewise is there an expansion in one’s spirituality and religious horizon from one phase to another. Knowing God through “disclosure and witnessing” (*al-kashf wa al-‘ayān*) is thus superior to knowing him through “evidence and argument” (*al-dalīl wa al-burhān*), which is in turn superior to knowing him through “imitation and submission” (*al-taqlīd wa al-iz‘ān*). These three modes of knowing God do not map directly over the three phases of spiritual growth, as the highest mode relates to both sainthood and prophecy, whereas the lower two modes relate to the various levels of understanding and corresponding degrees of faith.

To illustrate this point further, ‘Abd al-Ghanī gives an example of a colour-blind person, explaining that one’s belief in prophecy should be similar to the colour-blind person’s belief in colours. Just as a

colour-blind person cannot use other senses to compensate for their visual deficiency, nor can they use their reason to see colours, likewise, people cannot compensate for their spiritual deficiency that differentiates them from prophets, nor can they use their senses and reason to grasp what prophecy is. He writes:

The way for the colour-blind to believe in colours is to believe that there are things called “colours,” which are unlike the kind of things he perceives through his four senses and his reason. And that he is necessarily incapable of perceiving them because of his lacking the sense whereby they are perceived. He should fault all other perceptions with certainty and without any confusion, and believe that God has created others who are able to see and who, unlike him, have the visual sense that enables them to perceive colours. His believing in that is thus a belief in the unseen, and the belief in the prophecy of Muḥammad ... is of this kind.

As for the third question, what is your religion? the challenge lies in understanding the true nature of Islam, which forms the universal core of all religions. “Know, O my brother,” ‘Abd al-Ghanī writes, “that *al-dīn* (religion) is that to which man *yudīn*; that is, ‘succumbs’, ‘follows’, ‘obeys’, and ‘submits’, in accordance with the certainty of tradition (*al-ikhbārāt al-yaqīniyya*) and the formation of divine law (*al-inshā’āt al-shar‘iyya*)... And al-Islam is ‘surrender’ (*istislām*) and ‘obedience’ (*inqiyād*), and so it shares with ‘religion’ the same meaning.” This way, the question becomes concerned with the universalities of religion, such as believing in the existence of God and his attributes, his prophets, his scriptures, his angels, his punishment and reward, and so forth.

The ultimate challenge of the trial by the two angels seems to lie in one’s ability to articulate sound rational answers to the three questions, as presented by ‘Abd al-Ghanī, but without surrendering one’s horizon to the dictates of rationality, because with matters of the unseen one cannot simply rely on one’s reason:

The reason behind the unbelief of the philosophers, the Dahriyyūn,<sup>2</sup> and the rest of the misguided and deviant groups, is the application of

<sup>2</sup> The “Dahriyyūn,” from the Arabic “*dahr*,” “aeon,” “a long period of time,” refers generally to a sect of materialist thinkers who believe in the eternity of the world, as opposed to those who attribute to it a creator or a cause. Al-Sharastānī refers to al-Tabī‘iyyūn al-Dahriyyūn as those who negate the intelligible, denying the existence of anything beyond the sensible world. See *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, 2:3, and *EI2*, “Dahriyya.”

rational understanding to what cannot be understood by reason. It is like someone holding a small scale used for measuring gold and being adamant that he will not believe the weight of anything unless he measures it using his scale. When he is presented with a rock or a mountain and is told its weight, he tries to measure it with his scale but he cannot because of the large size of the object and the minute size of his scale. At this point happiness is differentiated from misery: happy is the one who attributes deficiency to his scale and believes in what he is told, believing in the unseen... While miserable is the one who accuses the reporter of lying, thinking badly of him, while adhering to his scale, emphasising it, and depending on it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Letter 3.



*On Struggle (Jihād): Letter 3*

‘Abd al-Ghanī’s third letter in the *Wasā’il*, sent in late December 1677 CE, was addressed to an un-named correspondent in Istanbul. It is a lengthy epistle on the types and symbolic significance of human struggle (*jihād*) in Islam titled “Lamḥat al-Alṭāf wa Ḥaḍrat al-Ithāf” (“The Glance of Providence and the Presence of Guidance”). ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s introduction as well as other remarks suggest that his correspondent was a high-ranking official in the Ottoman army responsible for “managing the affairs of the soldiers.” Since we know very little about his connections with Ottoman officials, it is difficult to guess who that person was. During his brief visit to Istanbul ‘Abd al-Ghanī met with several military judges, but that was about thirteen years earlier. If he was writing to a particular judge in this instance, then the friendly tone of the letter suggests a continuous contact, about which we know almost nothing. “I felt an acceptance from you for what you were receiving from my words,” ‘Abd al-Ghanī wrote, suggesting that this was not the first communication between them. Yet, no replies or references to replies from the Ottoman official are included in the *Wasā’il*. As for the main purpose of the letter, it was prompted by the news that the Ottoman army had embarked on a campaign for a war (*ḥaraka jihādiyya*) against the infidels. On this important occasion, ‘Abd al-Ghanī felt obliged, as he puts it, to “activate the link of brotherhood in faith in order to disclose some advice in accordance with the demands of Islamic love.” In other words, he felt the need to advise his friend about the true meaning and significance of *jihād* in Islam, so that his brother in faith might “perfect his righteous deeds.”

After extended citations of prophetic traditions on the need for solidarity among Muslims in moments of crisis, and on Islamic war ethics, ‘Abd al-Ghanī reminds his friend of the two types of “war” or “struggle” (*jihād*): minor and major. The minor *jihād*, he explains, is one’s struggle against one’s external enemies, the infidels, whereas the major *jihād* is one’s struggle against one’s internal enemies, the bad and sinful thoughts and deeds in one’s own self. The major *jihād* is more important for Muslims than the minor one, he adds, because the existence of infidels and their persistence in their unbelief do not cause any harm to Muslims in matters that concern faith. The inner sinful thoughts of Muslims, however, do cause them harm by prompting them to commit sins and do the wrong thing. “The faithful is in a constant struggle against his self in order to avert its corrupting tendencies until he dies,”

‘Abd al-Ghanī writes, “whereas his struggle against the infidels is different: it is on at certain times, and off at others.”

In the major *jihād*, ‘Abd al-Ghanī refers to the role of *khawāṭir*, “quick-passing thoughts,” an important concept in Islamic psychology and morality discussed in some detail in the attachment to letter 14. The importance of *khawāṭir* lies in their evanescent nature: although they are subjective ideas related to an individual’s personal experiences and their connections with the world, they lie outside the mental control of individuals. Their inexplicable, rapid, and random appearance and disappearance distinguish them from deliberate thinking, reflection, remembering, and imagining. Ontologically, they belong to the spirit of the game of being, constituting one of its controlling instruments.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is their being outside the individual’s control that makes them dangerous, rendering bad *khawāṭir* as the real enemies against which Muslims are enjoined to struggle. But since their emergence in the *heart*—where Muslim scholars place them in order to set them apart from normal mental activities—is beyond individual power to prevent, their mere passing through is not sinful. Their quick passing prompts the mind to respond and the body to act and this is where one’s constant struggle lies: in fighting off bad and evil *khawāṭir* and nourishing good and pious ones. Speaking of *khawāṭir*, ‘Abd al-Ghanī explains:

If they (that is, bad *khawāṭir*) pass through one’s heart and one rejects them, they will not harm him, but if he accepts them then they will become related to him and he will be judged by their merit. This is like a situation in which a Muslim and an infidel are imprisoned together in one cell. If the infidel speaks his words of unbelief and worships other than God-most-high, this will not harm the Muslim because he neither agrees with what is being said nor accepts it from the infidel, yet he cannot part company from him.

After further citations from the Prophet and eminent Muslim scholars to support his argument that the inner struggle against the soul’s carnal desires is the real *jihād*, ‘Abd al-Ghanī turns to illustrating this inner struggle analogically with military imagery and war metaphors. Setting up his hermeneutical strategy, he writes:

Now that it has been established through this that the target is the edification of the outward and the inward, this can be achieved by

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<sup>4</sup> On the cosmological significance of *khawāṭir*, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt*, 1: 796–97 and Akkach 2005a, 191–92.

knowing the major *jihād*, which is the struggle of the soul, [and knowing] the enemy waiting to fight you in this [major] *jihād*, their soldiers, the king to whom you belong in this *jihād*, the Muslim soldiers on your side, the forts, castles, and secrets upon which the *jihād* occurs, and the weapons used in the *jihād* by the two sides.

In setting up his metaphoric scenes of the battlefield and the fighting armies, 'Abd al-Ghanī introduces the major *jihād*, not as a subjective personal struggle, but as an existential one with cosmic magnitude. After all, the emergence and free roaming of *khawāṭir*, good and bad, are neither of man's own making nor under his mental control. They belong to the conditions of being-in-the-world and to the controlling forces of the game of being. Detailing the existential picture of the battlefield, 'Abd al-Ghanī writes:

And of the existing universes there is the world of earth and heaven and that which is in-between, the so-called "lower world" (*al-dunyā*). The same can be found in the world of man: his body corresponds to earth, his soul's world corresponds to heaven, and the ethics that lie in-between [the body and the soul] correspond to the lower world and its people. Vigilance is one of Islam's kings, whose soldiers are good thoughts, while negligence is one of unbelief's kings, whose soldiers are bad thoughts. Reason acts as a minister for the king of Islam, when he is winning, managing all of his affairs correctly, and acts as a minister for the king of unbelief when he is winning, managing all of his affairs erroneously. Faith and Islam are two forts protecting the worshiper, lofty and impenetrable in the likeness of Mecca and Medina. The five prayers, fasting, praying, alms giving, and pilgrimage correspond to the forts and citadels, while religious duties, traditions, and desirable practices correspond to the protective fences for these forts and citadels. Lawful, doctrinal, and practical issues correspond to weaponry and the ammunition of war. The king of Islam, who is always vigilance, is constantly at war fighting the king of unbelief, who is negligence. And the former's soldiers, who are the good thoughts, are battling the latter's soldiers, who are the bad thoughts. In this war there perish from the two sides those whom God wills to perish, and survive those whom God wills to survive. Battling and fighting are always pursued in order to take control of the mentioned forts and citadels. Every fort claimed by the king of vigilance is built and maintained by sincerity, certainty, and piety, and each fort claimed by the king of negligence is destroyed and ruined by hypocrisy, scepticism, and arrogance.

After this scene-setting, 'Abd al-Ghanī begins to discuss in detail successive events of fighting, identifying the fortresses under attack in each event, the conflicting thoughts and reasoning involved, and the fighting tactics each knight uses. The first fortress that comes under

attack is the “fortress of faith” (*ḥiṣn al-īmān*), being the first to be built in one’s heart, the greatest, and “the most noble for the sultan of vigilance.” In fact, it is “the seat of this sultan” and the centre of his kingdom. And such is its nobility that it represents the fortress of Mecca among all the fortresses of the world. The fight over the fortress of faith centres on the relationship between God and man, divinity and humanity, involving weaponry of rationality and revelation. The knight of the good thoughts defends faith in God’s transcendence with weapons of revelation and tradition, while the knight of the bad thoughts attacks faith in God’s transcendence using weapons of reason and scepticism. This is followed by the battle over the fortress of Islam, which represents the revelation of one’s faith. In the world of the human body, the status of this fortress is in the state of Medina among the fortresses of the natural world. After this comes the battle over the fortress of fasting, then over the fortress of alms-giving, and so forth. These battles, which constitute the major *jihād* for ‘Abd al-Ghanī, are not restricted to issues of religious morality and personal ethics but extend to the battle of faith and reason, the mother of all battles during his period.

*On Causality: Letter 4*

‘Abd al-Ghanī’s letter to Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī (d. 1690 CE) is the longest and perhaps the most important epistle in the *Wasā’il*, as it deals with the critical issue of causality, which was also the subject of profound rethinking in Europe at the time. Al-Kūrānī, a leading scholar and influential theologian based in Medina, has been identified as a key figure in a wide circle of religious renewal and reform.<sup>5</sup> Two treatises by al-Kūrānī on the nature of voluntary human actions reached ‘Abd al-Ghanī through some friends, and he felt the urge to respond with a lengthy critique. It is not clear what had prompted al-Kūrānī to write his first treatise, “Maslak al-Sadād fī Mas’ilat Khalq Af’āl al-‘Ibād” (“The Right Approach to the Issue of the Creation of the Servants’ Actions”), which he completed in mid-1085 H/1674 CE.<sup>6</sup> In the opening passage he refers to the different views people have on this issue and his desire to clarify the right approach, but it is not clear whether he is referring to the old theological disputes or to a renewed debate at his time. The scant evidence we have suggests the latter, or at least some resurging public interest in the topic. Al-Kūrānī’s treatise prompted a lengthy response from an un-named colleague, asking for detailed clarification of many of the terms, concepts, and arguments used in the *Maslak*. This response was titled “al-Isti’dād li-Sulūk Maslak al-Sadād” (“Preparing to Follow the Right Approach”).<sup>7</sup> This prompted al-Kūrānī to respond with his second lengthy treatise, “Imdād dhawī al-Isti’dād li-Sulūk Maslak al-Sadād” (“Supporting the One Preparing to Follow the Right Approach”), in which he addressed the questions raised and added more clarification. We do not know when his colleague’s treatise was written, but al-Kūrānī completed the second treatise three years after writing the first, in mid-1088 H/1677 CE. ‘Abd al-Ghanī received the two treatises, studied them, wrote his lengthy critique, and posted it within a span of fifteen months from the completion date of Kūrānī’s second treatise.<sup>8</sup> He titled his critique, which

<sup>5</sup> See Levtzion and Voll 1987.

<sup>6</sup> In the title of this treatise, the word *sadād* can also be read as *sidād* (as it appears in one of the manuscripts), to rhyme with *‘ibād*, in which case the title would read as “The Adequate Approach to the Issue of the Creation of the Servants’ Actions.”

<sup>7</sup> This treatise is cited in al-Kūrānī’s “Imdād Dhawī al-Isti’dād li-Sulūk Maslak al-Sadād.”

<sup>8</sup> This shows the remarkable speed with which exchanges and ideas travelled in the region, facilitated probably by an efficient postal system and most certainly in

comprises letter 4 of the *Wasā'il*, "Taḥrīk Silsilat al-Widād fi Mas'ilat Khalq Af'al al-'Ibād" ("Activating the Link of Friendship on the Issue of the Creation of the Servants' Actions"). Then, 'Abd al-Ghanī was thirty-seven, and al-Kūrānī was sixty-three. Despite hoping for a friendly response, even a brief one, from the renowned master, 'Abd al-Ghanī does not seem to have received a reply from al-Kūrānī, who, understandably, may have been displeased by such strong criticism from the young Damascene scholar. Whatever the case may be, the four treatises (including the one by the unknown author), along with several others on the same topic by the two scholars, deserve a separate lengthy study.<sup>9</sup> Here, I can refer only briefly to some of the key points of the debate.

The central topic of the debate was the nature of God's activities in the world; that is, his role in the creation of human actions and natural causes. The main concern was the degree of autonomy that can be ascribed to human conduct and the processes of natural phenomena. In a much earlier debate, between the Mu'tazila and the Ash'ariya, a conceptual distinction emerged between the notion of "power" (*qudra*) and the notion of "effect" (*ta'thīr*), and the relationship of both to the acting agent that causes an effect.<sup>10</sup> While cause and effect may appear to be bound by a straightforward linear relationship, the roles individual and divine powers play in the process of causing an effect are not. In fact, one of the clarifications sought by al-Kūrānī's un-named colleague was the meanings of both *al-ta'thīr* and its parallel, *al-qudra*, and the degree of overlap between them. When a person stands up or fire burns, for example, the contention was about whether or not it is the person's individual power that causes the effect of standing or nature's power that causes the effect of burning. If not, as was the position of official orthodoxy, which adopted the Ash'ariya's view, what then is the nature of God's involvement in both processes, and how does God cause an effect through humans and natural forces without these becoming passive instruments in his hand?

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this case by the annual pilgrimage that brought together on a regular basis scholars and students from all over the Islamic world.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Kūrānī wrote several other treatises on the topic, such as "Maslak al-I'tidāl," "al-Ilmā' al-Muḥīṭ," "al-Mutimma," "Dhayl al-Mutimma," and 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote at least one more, "Radd al-Jāhil." See the bibliography section Unpublished Arabic Manuscripts Cited for details.

<sup>10</sup> See al-Ash'arī, *Al-Lumā'*.

To simplify the complex polemics surrounding these issues, let us return briefly to the game of being. As already explained, the players through their playing unfold the game as a state of being with a spirit of its own that controls their playing and prevails over everyone involved, including the spectators. Thus, while the players appear to be acting and interacting according to their own individual will and power, they are in reality under the controlling forces of the game's spirit. In the old debate, the Mu'tazila emphasised the roles of the players, granting them almost total autonomy in their actions on the basis that it is they who unfold the game in the first place. For them, it is the players who create their fortunes, good and bad, and are eventually fully accountable for their deeds. The Ashā'ira, on the other hand, emphasised the controlling role of the game's spirit, granting the players only relative autonomy in their actions on the basis that the "effect" (*ta'thīr*) is in reality caused by the game's spirit, which has the ultimate control, and not the players. And in order for the players not to appear as passive instruments in the game's hands, the Ashā'ira proposed that the game causes an effect *at* (*ind*) the player's action, not *by* (*bi*) it. The "at" seems to refer to the circumstantial forces always at play, prompting players to act and interact in different ways on different occasions. Thus, although players appear to have power to act and free will to choose when and how to do so, these remain subject to unpredictable circumstantial forces inherent in the game's spirit that are completely outside their control. This way, the Ashā'ira were able to hinge *al-ta'thīr*, "causing an effect," onto the interplay between an unpredictable circumstance and a predictable human action or natural cause. And, with the spirit of the game of being representing God's control over the world's affairs, the Ashā'ira succeeded in keeping God engaged with the world while granting both man and nature relative autonomy. Their theology and ontology prevailed in the Sunnī world.<sup>11</sup>

In his first treatise, al-Kūrānī seems to make a subtle modification to the Ash'ariyya's principle—that God creates *at*, and not *by*, natural causes and human actions—by introducing the notion of divine "permission" or "authorisation" (*idhn*), and arguing that individual power and natural causes produce their effects by the mediation of God's permission and not autonomously. In other words, when a person stands up or fire burns, the effects of standing and burning are mediated by a divine permission that allows the process to take place and

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<sup>11</sup> The Ash'ariyya was a relative improvement over the old Jabriyya, in both its concepts and its subtlety.

the effects to occur. The notion of divine “permission” introduces an unpredictable factor into causality and natural processes that deprives them of the relative autonomy they entertained under the Ash‘ariyya theology. Hinging everything on a divine permission that is necessarily inexplicable and unpredictable not only increases God’s dominance over the natural world but also undermines the autonomy of natural processes and the predictability inherent in the consistency and uniformity of natural laws.

It is not clear whether al-Kūrānī’s theory was intended to strip humans and nature of the relative autonomy they had entertained for a long time, or whether it was simply a misreading of the sources. Al-Kūrānī says nothing about his intentions but states that he was basing his exposition on the last and most reliable work of al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyāna (Clarifying the Principles of Religion)*.<sup>12</sup> In his critique, ‘Abd al-Ghanī identifies, discusses, and dwells upon the implications of al-Kūrānī’s novel interpretations, presenting them more as a misunderstanding of the sources than a deliberate rethinking of the theory. This might be so; however, it is hard to imagine that an outstanding and sophisticated theologian such as al-Kūrānī, who wrote several other treatises on the topic, would misunderstand such a significant and widely discussed theory.

‘Abd al-Ghanī’s thorough and systematic critique covers many aspects; however, his main points of contention were, first, al-Kūrānī’s view that individual power causes an effect with divine permission, not autonomously, and, second, that this view is based on the Qur‘ān, the prophetic traditions, and the teachings of al-Ash‘arī. ‘Abd al-Ghanī seemed extremely concerned that al-Kūrānī not only misinterpreted his sources but that he also presented his ideas as being universally shared by Sunnī Muslims. “We were greatly startled over this matter” (*ḥaṣala ‘indānā waqfa ‘azīma fī hādihā al-amr*), he wrote in his opening remarks. He went on to interrogate al-Kūrānī’s statements through several scenarios, to discuss the implications of the concept of divine “permission” with regard to the relationship between divine and human powers, and to present his own interpretations of the Ash‘ariyya. The conclusion one can draw from ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s long and meticulous critique is that al-Kūrānī’s proposition—“that individual power causes an effect by God’s permission, not autonomously”—is, first, meaningless and absurd however one looks at it, and, second, not in

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ash‘arī, *al-Ibāna*; see also his *Maqālāt* and *al-Luma‘* for more details.



line with the Ash'ariyya's view or with other credible interpretations by Muslim theologians and mystics.

To illustrate his understanding of the Ash'ariyya, 'Abd al-Ghanī cited the verse "And of his wondrous works are ... the sun and the moon" (41: 37), with reference to which he then assimilated the relationship between God's and man's power with that of the sun and the moon. Just as the light of the moon is an effect of the light of the sun, so is man's power an effect of God's power. "If one reflects carefully on this," he wrote, "one will realise that one's created power is an effect (*athar*) of his Lord's eternal power. One will also realise how actions occur with God's sole power working at one's power, not by it." Viewing man's power as essentially an effect rather than a cause maintains God as the sole cause of all effects in the world, including man's voluntary actions. An effect can be a cause, in itself producing another effect, however, as when the light of the moon dispels the darkness of the night, but the moon's capacity to dispel darkness is inherently dependent on the power of the sun, even though the latter is invisible at night. This is how God's ultimate power becomes "veiled by its effect, which is the servant's power." He further explains:

What appears in the night of [natural] creations is the moon of the servant's power, illuminating with an illumination that conceals the appearance of the illuminating sun of God's power, which is hidden in the night of creations. So when we say it is the light of the moon that dispels the darkness of the night, according to what appears to the senses, we actually mean that what dispels the darkness of the night is the light of the sun alone, which creates the light of the moon, at the moon's capacity to shine, [not by it]. The attribution of the dispelling power to the light of the moon is true only insofar as it is being supported by the light of the sun, and insofar as the appearance of this dispelling power is at that support, not by it. And so are voluntary actions: God creates them at the individual power, not by it.

With this critique, 'Abd al-Ghanī upheld the Ash'ariyya's view on causality. While maintaining God's infinite power as being ultimately responsible for all effects in the natural world, he argued for the relative autonomy of natural processes, and the need for the mediation of cause and effect. With this position he could accommodate—as a legitimate interpretation—the rational views that attribute effects to human actions, an issue he discussed in a separate treatise fifteen months later.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Nābulusī, "Radd al-Jāhil ilā al-Ṣawāb;" see Unpublished Arabic Manuscripts Cited.

If the natural world is not ascribed a degree of autonomy, all beings become merely passive instruments in God's hand, and the religious system of obligations, reward, and punishment becomes meaningless. Al-Kūrānī's concept of divine permission is shown to be an unnecessary mediation that only undermines the consistency and predictability of the natural system.

*On Solitude: Letters 6 and 10*

Solitude (*khalwa*) is a common Sufi practice intended to isolate the devotee from worldly attachment so that their attention is devoted solely to God. According to 'Abd al-Ghanī's main biographer, Kamāl al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, 'Abd al-Ghanī secluded himself for seven continuous years, between 1091 H/1681 CE and 1098 H/1687 CE. In my book on 'Abd al-Ghanī's life and work, I cross-examined al-Ghazzī's story against other references and contested the accuracy of his account.<sup>14</sup> Letters 6 and 10 of the *Wasā'il*, sent to Mulla Aḥmad of Hayrabolu and Mulla Muḥammad al-Ḥumaydī of Constantinople respectively, offer further evidence supporting my argument that there was no such long uninterrupted period of solitude, but rather a series of retreats that started twelve or thirteen years before these letters were written. These two letters also offer insights into 'Abd al-Ghanī's understanding of the meaning of "solitude" and the way it should be practised. In addition, the thirty-three letters (letter 11 to letter 43) written during the assumed seven years of solitude give us a good idea about the range of intellectual and religious issues he was engaged with. When these preoccupations are laid over the recreational events recorded in his anthology *The Wine of Bābel* during the same period, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with total seclusion as al-Ghazzī would like us to believe.

In letter 10, sent on 22 Dhū al-Ḥijja 1090 H/24 January 1680 CE, 'Abd al-Ghanī apologised to his friend for not corresponding with him as frequently as he would have liked because of his many preoccupations. He then added:

And God-most-high has endowed us with a retreat and house seclusion away from social exchange, and he preoccupied us—by the pure beneficence he bestowed on us—with study, reading, compiling, and writing, according to what he, who is in charge of all situations, allows to take place.

This is the first reference in the *Wasā'il* to 'Abd al-Ghanī's abandoning of public life and entering into solitude. In two letters sent earlier in the same year, to Mulla Aḥmad and Ibrāhīm Afandī respectively, 'Abd al-Ghanī made no reference to his solitude. Although one cannot automatically conclude that he was not in retreat then, this makes it more

<sup>14</sup> See Akkach 2007a.

likely, with the support of other evidence, that he entered this particular solitude some time between Ṣafar and Dhū al-Ḥijja of 1090 H/1679–80 CE. The available evidence does not corroborate al-Ghazzī's story that this solitude went on uninterrupted for seven years.

In letter 6, 'Abd al-Ghanī spoke of his approach to "inner piety" (*al-taqwā al-bāṭiniyya*) and explained what it entails. His explanation offers us valuable insights into his understanding of the nature, function, and practice of solitude, confirming that the real solitude for him is a spiritual one. Physical solitude, though necessary to reach spiritual solitude, can, and in fact should, be abandoned once spiritual solitude has delivered the desired outcome. Addressing his friend Mulla Aḥmad, he wrote:

I have heard about you, O my brother, that you are vigilant in your religion and strict in following the commands and interdictions, and I love you because of that. Hence, I love for you what I love for myself; that is, to adopt the approach of "inner piety" (*al-taqwā al-bāṭiniyya*) in order for both the outward and the inward to be perfect for you. By "inner piety" I mean your passage from the outward forms into the intelligible realities, so that you witness with the eye of insight that every move of a prayer's postures, as well as other aspects of worship, has Lordly references and merciful secrets. And every application of the divine law's rulings has an outer and an inner function: the ruling of the law is a body, while the divine wisdom is a spirit for that body. Do not be content with the bodies over the spirits, nor preoccupy yourself with the spirits over the bodies. You should bring together both the outward and the inward. And my friend, may God protect him, should know that, to achieve that, there is no escape from entering "lawful solitude" (*al-khalwa al-shar'iyya*) and undergoing its "lawful training" (*al-riyāda al-shar'iyya*). By "solitude" I do not mean other than your individual witnessing of the real actor (*fā'il*), not the metaphorical one; then witnessing the real object of attributions (*mawṣūf*), not the metaphorical one; then witnessing the real existent (*mawjūd*), not the metaphorical one; then maintaining this witnessing until it consumes the senses and the mind. This is real spiritual solitude. As for metaphorical bodily solitude, it is to imprison your body in a lawful house and [restrict it] to lawful food, and cut yourself off, outwardly and inwardly, from everything outside that house by negation or affirmation, until you find real solitude and then you can go out of metaphorical solitude. Among the things that can lead you to achieving this is your celebrating and engaging with the books of the mystical sciences, such as those by Ibn 'Arabī, Ibn Sab'īn, al-'Afīf al-Tilimsānī, and the like, may God sanctify their secrets, after cleansing your insight from the contamination of rejecting any of them, until the gate of their

luminous secrets opens to your heart, and the truth of their resting on the centres of Muḥammadan law is revealed... And by “training” (*riyāda*), wherever I have mentioned it, I meant training the soul to perceive the truth, and letting it be accustomed to that in every situation gradually; that is, by attachment to and adopting of the traits of the evident Real; and then by becoming truthful (*al-taḥaqquq*): this is true spiritual training. As for metaphorical bodily training, it is by reducing food and water drinking... This training is sought for other ends, not for itself. It is thus a part of the whole approach and helps attain spiritual training, but only if it is not excessive, which would result in unhealthy delusions and be forbidden and harmful.

Solitude and reading mystical texts go hand in hand in ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s approach to inner piety. Elsewhere I drew attention to the emphasis ‘Abd al-Ghanī placed on the epistemological power of the text in the search for spiritual attainment.<sup>15</sup> It was the model he followed and the one he recommended to others at a time when true spiritual masters were hard to find. This formed the basis of his individual approach to “urban Sufism.” In letter 9, to Ibrāhīm Afandī, he reiterated this. “Reflect upon what I wrote in this paper, O my brother,” he wrote, “and keep turning your reflection upon it until you understand it profoundly. By doing this you can do away with the help of the perfect spiritual guide and with meeting him. For even when one meets with a prophet, it is not in the prophet’s power to make one reach God-most-high.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Akkach 2007a, 33–35, 46–48.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 9.

*On Quick-Passing Thoughts (Khawāṭir): Letter 14*

Letter 14 is a short note attached to a long treatise that is not included in the *Wasā'il*. 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote the treatise, "Raf' al-Rayb 'an Ḥaḍrat al-Ghayb" ("Clearing the Doubt Concerning the Presence of the Unseen"), in response to a request he received from Ibrāhīm Afandī, to whom letter 14 was addressed.<sup>17</sup> In length, *Raf' al-Rayb* is similar to the previous treatises that he included in full in the letters themselves and not as attachments. Here he decided to keep the letter short and attach the treatise as a separate document. "You had mentioned to us the writing of something on resisting quick-passing thoughts (*khawāṭir*) and perseverance in the practice of invocation (*dhikr*)," 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote in letter 14, "so we wrote to you this treatise, which I called 'Raf' al-Rayb 'an Ḥaḍrat al-Ghayb', and sent it to you with the person carrying this letter." This makes it clear that the treatise was not meant to be included as part of the letter itself as was the case with the previous ones; however, since the attached epistle is an integral part of his correspondence we need to dwell on its content briefly here.

Letter 14 and the epistle attached to it deal with the concept of *khawāṭir* (quick-passing thoughts), which was a central concept in premodern Islamic psychology and religious ethics. The extensive literature available on the psychology of *khawāṭir* in premodern Islamic thought testifies to its significance. The term *khawāṭir*, plural of *khāṭir*, derives from the noun *khaṭar*, "danger," "clout," "power," and the verb *khaṭara*, "to strut," "to prance." Describing their nature, 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote, "*al-khawāṭir* appear in the heart and disappear quickly; thus, they belong to the heart and are of a source that is outside man's power. The *khāṭir* does not stand firm unless it is tied down by man."<sup>18</sup> Thus understood, *khawāṭir* are clearly distinguished from the mind's mental processes—*tafkīr*, "thinking," and *nazar*, "reflection"—through which an individual "ties down" the flashes of the heart. The significance of *khawāṭir* hinges on three basic propositions: first, that fleeting thoughts

<sup>17</sup> In fact, 'Abd al-Ghanī received many such requests from regional colleagues to which he responded; yet, for unknown reasons, he chose not to refer to or include them in the *Wasā'il*.

<sup>18</sup> *Raf'*, 22. This and the following Arabic citations from "Raf' al-Rayb" are based on two manuscripts from the Zāhiriyya collection, MS 1377 and MS 1418.

"الخواطر جمع خاطر، والخواطر تعرض على القلب وتنجلي بسرعة، وهي مما يخلص القلب، ومما هو خارج عن قدرة الإنسان، فالخاطر هو مما لا يثبت إلا أن يربطه الإنسان."

bring ideas and instigate actions; second, that they belong to the realm of the heart and not the mind; and third, that the cause of their random appearance lies outside self-consciousness and individual rational power. The concept of *khawāṭir* presents an area of fundamental difference between premodern and modern psychology, which invented the idea of “the subconscious” in order to accommodate what is inexplicable in rational terms.

To explain the role and working of *khawāṭir* in human affairs and social interactions, let us turn again briefly to the game of being metaphor introduced earlier in this discussion. One of the main differences between a game of sport and the game of being is the pace of the play. In a game of sport the pace is fast, while in the game of being it is comparatively slow. The speed of the play in a game of sport reduces the span of thinking before acting. The idea of the game’s spirit taking control over the players’ actions and interactions in their playing can be explained by reference to the fact that the players have no time to think. Their split-second decisions to act or react in certain ways are based on bodily training and not careful mental deliberation. In the game of being, however, players have ample time to think, plan, negotiate, deliberate, revise, and so forth, and with these mental activities they appear to be in control of the game and their own destiny. Indeed, this view generated a whole new understanding and ways of playing during the Enlightenment, when European thinkers placed unprecedented emphasis on human mental capacity. From a premodern Islamic perspective, however, this unique and powerful mental capacity gives only the illusion that the players are in control of the game. In reality, the game remains in control, and one of its controlling instruments is *khawāṭir*. The celebrated theologian Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350 CE) (an eminent disciple of Ibn Taymiyya) for example, recognises *khawāṭir* as “the starting point of every theoretical science and every voluntary action.”<sup>19</sup>

In the complex network of forces that governs the game of being, *khawāṭir* can be described as the impulses the game generates through these forces to prompt the players to act or respond in certain ways. In the fast unfolding of games of sport there is no room for thinking, but as the speed of interactions drops fleeting thoughts emerge. In the seemingly slow pace of the game of being these incessant fleeting thoughts randomly frequenting one’s heart play a vital role in directing

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<sup>19</sup> Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, *al-Fawā'id*, 175.

one's engagement with the world. By keeping *khawāṭir* within the realm of the heart, not the mind, premodern Muslim thinkers recognised a difference in nature between one's erratic flashes of thought emerging in the heart, and deliberate and directed thoughts occurring in the mind. With this recognition they emphasised that, while the human mind can, through deliberate and directed thoughts, capture, tie down, and act upon randomly fleeting ideas, the source of the latter remains outside the control of the self-conscious mind.<sup>20</sup>

A key concept in Islamic ethics that goes hand in hand with the concept of *khawāṭir* in acknowledging the presence of external forces that dictate one's actions is that of *tawfīq*, "guidance to do the right thing." In the Islamic context, an individual cannot be said to guide him or herself to do the right thing: *tawfīq* can happen only through the help of an external power. 'Abd al-Ghanī tells his friend Ibrāhīm in the attachment to letter 14:

Know, O my brother, that *al-tawfīq*, mentioned by the 'ulamā' of the doctrinal sciences as well as others, is extremely important in itself and in its implications, and the obligated individuals cannot attain it by their own efforts. It has no means other than imploring God with much or little persistence. Yet among the things that lead to it are good intention, sincere heart, purity of the chest from envy of colleagues and ill-thought of one's contemporaries, abandoning arguing with one's brothers completely, and sleeping and waking up without any evil thought for any human.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In *Raf'*, 22, 'Abd al-Ghanī explains the psychology of *khawāṭir* as follows:

"فمن الخواطر ما يعرض من جهة المزاج ميلاً إلى ما يوافق، فهذا إذا تمكن سمي 'شهوة'، وضده نفرة، ومنها ما يعرض لنيل رتبة، فإذا تمكن سمي 'همة'، ومنه ما يعرض باعثاً على الفعل، فإذا تمكن سمي 'مشيئة'، ومنه ما يعرض باستعجال اللقاء، فإذا تمكن سمي 'علماً'، وإن كان متردداً سمي 'شكاً'، فإن عرض بذكر ما لا حقيقة له على سبيل الثبات سمي 'جهلاً'، ولجميع الأخلاق والحاصل خواطر متى تمكنت سميت بأسماء تخصصها."

<sup>21</sup> *Raf'*, 21.

"اعلم يا أخي أن 'التوفيق' الذي ذكره علماء العقائد وغيرهم، أمره عظيم وشأنه جسيم، وهو لا يحصل للمكلف بالتحصيل، وليس له سبب إلا التضرع إلى الله تعالى بكل كثير الهمة وقليل. ومن أسبابه حسن النية وخلص الطوية، وسلامة الصدر من الحسد للأقران والضغائن لأبناء الزمان، وترك المجادلة رأساً مع الإخوان، وأن يبات الإنسان ويصبح وما في قلبه سوء لإنسان."



Achieving these qualities is directly related to managing one's *khawāṭir*; that is, finding ways to disable and resist bad thoughts and to enable and nourish good thoughts. This is a crucial part of the Sufi's spiritual training that aims to eliminate bad thoughts and harness the power of good ones. "You have asked me, O my brother...", wrote 'Abd al-Ghanī, referring to his friend's request, "to write you something on the repression of the *khawāṭir* that invade the heart and confuse the inner eye, thereby limiting one's perception to the phenomena of the physical world and rendering one unable to rise to the mysteries of the spiritual world."<sup>22</sup> Confusing the inner eye is the *danger*, which *khawāṭir* have inherent in their very nature, that impedes divine guidance to doing the right thing (*tawfiq*) and limits one's spiritual growth.

To manage the danger inherent in *khawāṭir*, the Sufis teach the practice of invocation (*dhikr*), a repetitive recitation of words, prayers, or supplications aimed at engaging the mind and training the heart to repress the appearance of quick-passing, negative thoughts. Limiting one's social interaction also reduces one's intensity of playing and exposure to the game's undesirable influences, while at the same time increasing the effectiveness of invocation. "If you, O my brother, reduce your mixing with people, and your engaging and interacting with them, to essential necessities," 'Abd al-Ghanī advised his friend Ibrāhīm, "then, God willing, the *khawāṭir* you dislike will retreat away from you." As for the practice of invocation, 'Abd al-Ghanī explains, one can either repeat a prayer orally or observe it in the heart. "The aim," he writes, "is for you not to feel any pretence in the continuous remembrance of God in your heart and mind, and to be invoking in every situation. And you should not invoke God believing that it is you who is invoking by the power of your self, but you should invoke believing that it is he who is invoking himself through your tongue and your heart." Using the analogy of how a particular medicine is prepared to cure an illness, 'Abd al-Ghanī further explains how invocation works and how one can increase its effectiveness:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

”سألني يا أخي، عاملك الله تعالى وإيانا بلطفه الخفي، وأجراك في الحياة الدنيا وفي الآخرة وإيانا على عوايد بره الخفي، أن أكّتب لك شيئاً يتعلق بنفي الخواطر التي تدهم القلب فتشوش عين اللب، فيقتصر الإدراك بسبب ذلك على ظواهر عالم الملك، ولا يترقى إلى سراير عالم الملكوت.“

Know, O my brother, may God take you by the hand in all goodness, that the effect of these and other supplications, as well as the effect of the divine names, for whatever reason they are invoked, depend, in reaching a complete result, on crossing the distance of the world of divine actions and reaching the [state of] witnessing the world of names and attributes. For as long as the invoker continues to recognise in himself and in other creatures will and power, and bases his invocation and supplication on the idea that there are actions caused by other than God, even if this is due to negligence rather than firm belief, there will be no outcome for his invocation and appeal other than whatever occurs in his heart of humility and exaltedness. The letters of the divine names are in the state of ingredients from which a medicine is made for a particular illness. If the ingredients from which the medicine is made were used separately before being combined together, or were combined incorrectly, with regard to the technique used in cooking and combining, then the outcome would be of no benefit for the intended use. Here, the preparedness of the heart and seeing God as being solely responsible for all actions, alone, without any creature whatsoever, is like cooking the ingredients of the divine names' letters, and is similar to combining them in order to make them productive. Thus, every time one invokes the ingredients need to be cooked and combined according to the mentioned method of preparation. Emptying the heart completely from everything except God at the time of the invocation is like sterilising the container in which the ingredients are combined to prevent contamination that would destroy its effectiveness and quality. The heat of passion and desire, and a wholehearted approach to drawing near to God and attaining the state of knowing him, are in the likeness of the fire: it accelerates the cooking so that the perfection of the medicine occurs with every invocation of one of God's names. The divine names are all exalted and majestic and have universal benefits in the way they edify the invoker's state and change his tenebrous substance into the world of illumination and the station of luminous spirituality. Some of the names have a faster effect than others in the way they work, and the invoker himself should know which of the names is faster in effect than others.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 26.

”واعلم يا أخي، أخذ الله بيدك في كل خير، أن تأثير هذه الأدعية وغيرها، وتأثير أسماء الله فيها قُصدت له، موقوف في تحصيل النتيجة التامة على قطع مسافة عالم الأفعال الإلهية والوصول إلى شهود عالم الأسماء والصفات. فإن الداعي ما دام يشهد له حولاً وقوة، ولغيره من الخلق، ويبنى دعاءه وتوسله على أن في الوجود أفعالاً حادثة صادرة من غيره تعالى، ولو بحسب الغفلة لا الاعتقاد، فلا نتيجة لذكره واستعاذته غير مجرد ما يقع في قلبه من الخشوع والتعظيم. فإن حروف الأسماء الإلهية بمنزلة الأجزاء التي يتركب منها الدواء المجعول للداء. والأجزاء التي

يتركب منها الدواء، إذا استعملها المريض منفردة قبل تركيبها، أو ركبها على خلاف ما هو الصواب في كيفية طبخها وتركيبها، يخرج الدواء غير نافع النفع المقصود. وههنا الاستحضار في القلب ورؤية انفراد الله تعالى بالأفعال كلها، دون أحدٍ من الخلق مطلقاً، بمنزلة طبخ أجزاء حروف الأسماء الإلهية، وبمنزلة تركيبها حتى يتم نتاجها. فكل مرة من الذكر تحتاج إلى طبخ الأجزاء والتركيب بالاستحضار المذكور، وتفريغ القلب مما سوى الله تعالى بالكلية في وقت الذكر بمنزلة غسل الإناء الذي توضع الأجزاء فيه لئلا تتدنس، فيبطل عملها وتذهب خاصيتها، وحرارة الشوق والرغبة والإقبال بالقلب على القرب إلى الله تعالى وعلى تحصيل مقام معرفته بمنزلة النار، يُعجل الطبخ ويُحصّل تمام الدواء في كل ذكر اسم من أسمائه سبحانه وتعالى. والأسماء الإلهية كلها عظيمة جليّة، لها منافع كلية في اصطلاح حال الذكر وانتقلا ب طينته الظلمانية إلى عالم الإشراف ومقام الروحانية النورانية، ولكن بعضها أسرع من بعض في العمل المذكور.

*On Smoking: Letter 25*

During ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s time, the new social habits of smoking and coffee-drinking became the topics of heated debate and the cause of serious social unrest in Ottoman cities, and provincial centres such as Damascus. Strict religious clerics moved to ban them, while Ottoman and Arab officials wavered in their responses as the new habits became rampant in high social circles. ‘Abd al-Ghanī was openly and unreservedly against the ban and against the narrow, subjective, and misguided legal interpretations the clerics had presented in their drive to prohibit these foreign habits. In late 1092 H/1681 CE, while in solitude, ‘Abd al-Ghanī wrote a long treatise (sixty-one double-page folios in tight script), critically examining the legal, medical, and social evidence on smoking to show that it was not only perfectly legal and socially acceptable to smoke but also that smoking was beneficial for the health.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> ‘Abd al-Ghanī opens his treatise on smoking with the following long, rhymed introduction which outlines the debate and sums up his position. *Sulh*, 331:

”بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. الحمد لله الذي جعل استعمال دخان التتن نافعاً بتجفيفه الرطوبات الزائدة في الأجسام؛ ومحلاً لما تكاثف في الصدر من لزوجة البلغم، ومهضمًا عن المعدة ثقل الطعام؛ وطاردًا للرياح المحتبسة في العروق، وله تقوية الطبيعة، وتصفية البخار الصاعد إلى الدماغ، وحدة الأفهام؛ وكل له من منافع أخرى يعرفها المحربون له، لأنهم أعلم به من غيرهم من الأنام؛ ولا سيما وقد تأيدت تجربتهم بما كتب الأطباء من التصريح بنفعه من السموم، خصوصاً سم العقرب، شرباً وضاداً، وأن دخانه كهو من غير الخزام؛ كما سيتلى عليك في هذه الصحيفة من الكلام؛ فسبحانه من إله أظهر فساد قول من نسب إليه المضرة في البدن والعقل بعدم وجود شئ من ذلك في أحد المستعملين له على مدا الأوقات وتطويل الشهور والأعوام؛ حتى لم نسمع في عمرنا أصلاً أن فلاناً مرض من شرب التتن، أو أنه مات منه، أو زال عقله في يوم من الأيام؛ ومتى حصل شئ من ذلك لأحد، كان ضرره خاصاً به دون غيره، فهو عليه حرام؛ وإنما في استعماله النشاط والسهر وزوال الكسل، لمن اعتاد عليه، ولهذا لا تراه يسمع فيه الملام؛ ولا لهوفيه، ولا لعب، لحصول الاستعانة به في قابلية متعاطيه للأعمال على الوجه التام؛ خصوصاً وهو حالة استعماله يشغل اللسان عن مثل الغيبة والكذب، ويحبس اليد عن تناول الآثام؛ والصلاة والسلام على سيدنا محمد، المنزل عليه ’وأطيعوا الله وأطيعوا الرسول وأولي الأمر منكم’ (النساء: ٩٥)، بلا جعل الطاعة مستقلة لأولي الأمر، حيث لم يقل ’وأطيعوا أولي الأمر‘، لتقييد طاعتهم بالمصلحة لنا من عدم عصمتهم، كما قرره علماء الإسلام؛ وأية مصلحة في ترك ما فشا نفعه، وكذبت دعوى مضرته بين الخاص والعام؛ فالنهي عنه مجرد التشهي، وهو النفس، والتحكم بالرأي العقلي، لا يقتضي وجوب الاحترام؛ وليست مرارته وزخومة

Explaining the reason behind writing the treatise, which he called “al-Ṣulḥ bayn al-Ikhwān fī Ḥukm Ibāḥat al-Dukhān” (“Reconciling the Brothers over the Ruling on the Permissibility of Smoking”), ‘Abd al-Ghanī refers to the widespread anxiety associated with this issue:

This is a brief treatise the brothers have repeatedly asked me to write; they have long been begging for it and the grounds of their wishes have greatly expanded. And by the one and only God, what prompted me to write it is not my love of smoking, or my fanatic disagreement with anyone of this time, but rather the intent of fairness in clarifying the issue, and of preserving the rulings of the sanctified law against the intrusion of [unfair] additions and deductions. And my support for the ruling of permissibility is for the sake of clearing the [misconceptions] regarding this particular plant that are not based on legal evidence or texts but rather on mere rational analogy and subjective conjecture.<sup>25</sup>

Letter 25 reveals the growing sensitivity among the Turks towards this issue, indicating that ‘Abd al-Ghanī was perhaps among a minority arguing in support of the new habit. Muḥammad al-Ḥumaydī of Edirne, one of ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s closest correspondents, had been actively spreading ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s teaching in the Ottoman heartland. He wrote to ‘Abd al-Ghanī in 1095 H/1684 CE with a serious concern that ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s reference to the lawfulness of smoking in his major commentary on al-Birgīlī’s *al-Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya* (*The Muḥammadan Way*), a popular and useful book, was likely to attract criticism that might result in its banning from public use.<sup>26</sup> He there-

رايخته خبثاً، لاستحلال أهل الرفاهية واليسار له، وهم المعتبرون دون أهل الغلظة، كما سيأتي في تحقيق هذا المقام؛ ورضوان الله تعالى على جميع الآل والأصحاب، السادة الأئمة الأبرار، الذين تأتم العفاة بدخان شرفهم الفاجح في الأقطار، وكأنه علم في رأسه نار.

<sup>25</sup> *Ṣulḥ*, 331.

”هذه رسالة مختصرة أكثر الإخوان في طلبها مني، وطال الترجي لها عندهم واتسع بساط التمني، والله الذي لا إله إلا هو ما حملني على تصنيفها محبتي لاستعمال الدخان، ولا تعصبي بالمخالفة فيه مع أحد من أهل الزمان، وإنما بعثني على ذلك قصد الإنصاف في البيان والمحافظة على أحكام الشريعة المطهرة حتى لا يدخلها شئ من الزيادة والنقصان، والانتصار لحكم الإباحة أن يزول عن هذا النبات المخصوص، بغير أدلة شرعية ولا نصوص، بل بمجرد القياسات العقلية والتوهمات النفسانية.“

<sup>26</sup> See al-Nābulusī, *al-Ḥadīqa al-Nadiyya Sharḥ al-Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*.

fore sought ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s permission to remove the part on smoking from the commentary, and advised him to do so in order to ensure maintenance of people’s access to it. ‘Abd al-Ghanī received the request graciously, thanked his friend for his genuine concern, and replied, saying:

But we say to you now that what you have mentioned is correct with regard to the condition of this world, to the promotion of knowledge in it, and to the high esteem among its people, so that one may entertain holding a religious office with a worldly status. But this is something for which we have no desire, nor is there an urge for it in us. And we have never written a book seeking with it the favour of any creature, God willing. And how can it be fitting for us to mention in that book the topics of hypocrisy, fame, and showing off, and explain these matters to show the depravity of working for other than God, and then do the same ourselves and conceal it? This is for us the worst misconduct, from which we ask God to purify us. We have mentioned the issue of the permissibility of smoking in the mentioned commentary as well as in other books of ours. In fact we have written a complete book, extensive with seven chapters, explaining in it this permissibility to the elite and the public; this is despite the fact that we do not smoke, nor do we like it, nor do we have any personal conflict over it with anyone in the first place. But our nature’s dislike of it does not, on its own, necessitate in us a legal dislike. So we intended with that to move with the responsibility of the legal (*shar‘ī*) knowledge that we have in us to advise the community of Muḥammad, may God’s prayer be upon him, on the matter of their dispute and the confusion over this permissible matter. Thus, if God wills an acceptance of our books among the people nothing will stop that, regardless of whoever may discredit us deceptively. And if God does not will an acceptance of our books among the people, would anything we do work against the will of God-most-high? As for our mentioned commentary, it should remain as is, in the form that God has enabled us to write, and so should remain the rest of our books.

In his lengthy treatise on the permissibility of smoking, ‘Abd al-Ghanī provides interesting remarks on the social history of smoking in the Islamic world. He also makes many references to the history of coffee-drinking and the social upheaval it caused in Mecca and Cairo, where coffee sellers and drinkers were attacked violently and coffee-making and drinking equipment was destroyed. As for the origin of smoking, ‘Abd al-Ghanī says that the Europeans, having discovered its many benefits, were the first people to use it in their lands.<sup>27</sup> The first time it

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<sup>27</sup> *Sulh*, 342.

appeared in the Islamic lands, he adds, was towards the end of the 990s H/1580s CE; and it was the Christians who first brought it, from the land of the English. A Jewish doctor first introduced it to the land of the Maghrib (Morocco), and from there it spread into Egypt, Ḥijāz, Yaman, India, and the rest of the Islamic countries. According to al-Lāqānī, it appeared in the Sudan in the land of Tinbaksh in 1005 H/1596 CE, and according to Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, it appeared in Damascus ten years later, in 1015 H/1606 CE.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 343.

”وكان ابتداء حدوث الاستعمال لهذا التتن بالكيفية المخصوصة في ديار الإسلام أواخر المائة العاشرة. وأول من جلبه إلى البلاد الإسلامية النصارى من الجبل المسمى بـ’الإنكليز‘، وأول من أحدثه في أرض المغرب حكيم يهودي له فيه نظم وثر، وذكر له منافع عديدة، ثم جلب إلى مصر والحجاز واليمن والهند وغالب أقطار البلاد الإسلامية. وظهر في بلاد السودان في السنة الخامسة بعد الألف في بلاد تنبكش، كذا ذكر اللاقاني المالكي، رحمه الله، وظهره في دمشق الشام كان سنه خمس عشر بعد الألف، كذا ذكره النجم الغزي الشافعي، رحمه الله تعالى، في شرحه على منظومة أبيه البدر في الكباير والصغائر.“

*On Cosmogony and the Unity of Being: Letters 61 and 62*

‘Abd al-Ghanī’s exchanges with shaykh Aḥmad al-Kasbī of Aleppo (Ḥalab) involve lengthy reflections on cosmogony and the Unity of Being presented in five letters: an initial inquiry from ‘Abd al-Ghanī (letter 61), followed by three replies from al-Kasbī and a response from ‘Abd al-Ghanī (all in letter 62). The exchange is significant for revealing a sophisticated discussion of a complex aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s articulation of the Unity of Being, and for introducing al-Kasbī as an important figure, although he was little known. There are two curious things about ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s first letter. First, it is the only occasion in the *Wasā’il*, and indeed in almost all of his works, on which ‘Abd al-Ghanī appears to be seeking the advice and insights of another authority. On almost all other occasions, he appears as the leading authority of the time, the one who receives and answers questions, and the one who offers insights, guidance, and advice. Second, the letter does not include the introductory compliments found in all the other letters, in which ‘Abd al-Ghanī often introduces his correspondent. In this atypical letter he starts directly with the subject of his inquiry. Reciprocally, al-Kasbī’s first reply includes only a brief introductory paragraph but no complimentary statements about whether he holds ‘Abd al-Ghanī in high esteem. Then, ‘Abd al-Ghanī was sixty-nine years old and already widely famous among Arabs and Turks, as can be sensed from other letters. Even the highest religious authority in Istanbul, Shaykh al-Islam Fayḍ Allāh (or Feyzullah), addressed him in one letter as the “pole of the circle of righteousness, and the centre of guidance and good deeds.”<sup>29</sup> This level of formal courtesy common in correspondence is missing in this exchange between al-Nābulusī and al-Kasbī, perhaps because the two were too close or too foreign to one another (more likely the latter), so that they chose to leave out the customary introductory compliments and flowery rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the case may be, the exchange testifies to al-Kasbī’s high standing in theology and philosophical mysticism that prompted ‘Abd al-Ghanī to approach him in the first place. Yet, it is curious how little we know about him.

In *Jāmi‘ Karāmāt al-Awliyā’* al-Nabhānī (d. 1350 H/1931 CE) presents a brief biography of al-Kasbī quoted from Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī’s

<sup>29</sup> Letter 65.

<sup>30</sup> There is a tone of arrogance in this exchange from both sides, suggesting a sense of rivalry.



*al-Suyūf al-Hidād*, wherein he introduces al-Kasbī as shaykh Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Kasba al-Ḥalabī al-Qādirī. Al-Bakrī, 'Abd al-Ghanī's most illustrious disciple, describes al-Kasbī as one "who likes loneliness (*waḥda*), isolation from people, and devotion to God at all times."<sup>31</sup> During a visit to Damascus in 1122 H/1710 CE, al-Bakrī took a group of close friends to visit al-Kasbī, who also happened to be in Damascus at the time. Al-Kasbī welcomed the group and spoke to them at length, during which he said: "It is necessary for man, when God inspires him to write poetry or prose, not to be self-deluded and preoccupy his heart with that, but rather one must tear or burn it (that is, what one has written) because God has what is higher than that." After the meeting, al-Bakrī wrote, "I tore up the poetry I had composed, the beneficial texts I had written, and the litanies I had made, until I had torn up a great number of things. Yet, I had benefited from him a great deal during that meeting. Afterwards, I was not able to meet with him again because he had secluded himself from people. He knew God's book well and was well versed in the intellectual and traditional sciences. As he loses himself while speaking, perhaps the listener will find his words lacking in clarity."<sup>32</sup> Al-Bakrī also referred to al-Kasbī's exchange with 'Abd al-Ghanī and to his wide popularity in Aleppo.<sup>33</sup>

Turning to the content of the exchange, in his first brief letter (letter 61) 'Abd al-Ghanī sought al-Kasbī's insights into a question of cosmogony concerned with the initial stage of universal manifestation. The question relates to a line of poetry by Ibn 'Arabī from *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (*The Interpreter of Passions*), in which he wondered about the order of universal manifestation:

She revealed her front teeth and lightning flashed,  
so I knew not which of the two rent the gloom.<sup>34</sup>

Here Ibn 'Arabī refers to the initial cosmogonic moment that brought the world out of primordial darkness into the light of existence. This

<sup>31</sup> Al-Nabhānī, *Jamī'*, 1: 562.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1: 563.

”وكان بينه وبين شيخنا الشيخ عبد الغني النابلسي مكاتبات أثبتتها في كتاب المراسلات له، وكان له دائرة كبيرة في حلب، فخرج عنها رغبة في عمارة السريرة، فساح وناح، وباح عطره وفاح.“

<sup>34</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, *Tarjumān*, 17.

”فأبدت ثناياها وأومضَ بارقٌ  
فلم أدر من شق الحنادسَ منهما“

cosmic birth coincided with two events: the disclosure of Truth's essences, or the realities of being, symbolised by the revealing of the "front teeth," and the self-manifestation of being, symbolised by the flash of lightning. This introduces two simultaneous sources of light: the glowing whiteness of realities themselves, and the flashing light of being. With this perplexing duality, Ibn 'Arabī wondered which of the two initially tore up the darkness (*shaqq al-ḥanādīs*) of non-existence. In letter 61, 'Abd al-Ghanī asked al-Kasbī for insight into Ibn 'Arabī's uncertainty over this issue, which resonated with his own uncertainty. 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote:

There is no doubt that these "universal designations" (*al-ta'ayyunāt al-kawniyya*) are subsisting eternally in their designator; that is, the absolute, truthful being. Then these were manifested from their pure "affirmative designation" (*ta'ayyuniḥā al-thubūtī*) into realising their "existential designation" (*ta'ayyuniḥā al-wujūdī*). We are inquiring about this aspect of their manifestation, how should it be considered? Should it be considered from the aspect of the designations themselves, subsisting as they were in their designator, meaning that their designator turned towards them and caused their manifestation? The name of their eternal designator [in this case] is "knowledge" (*ilm*)... Or that knowledge manifested them with the name it is [also] known by under another consideration; that is, "command" (*amr*)? ... Or that the designations themselves were manifested in the order of manifestation [predetermined] in the "primordial command" (*al-amr al-qadīm*) directed upon them?

Al-Kasbī's reply came in three successive esoteric letters, all of which showed the lack of clarity al-Bakrī had referred to. In the first, he explored the implications of 'Abd al-Ghanī's questions. In the second, which was more poetic and obscure than the first, he reflected on key notions such as "light," "direction," and "name," dwelt on Ibn 'Arabī's lines of poetry, and discussed its metaphors. And in the third, he returned to the concept of "universal designations" and discussed the notion of "subsistence" (*qiyām*). In his letters, al-Kasbī examined 'Abd al-Ghanī's questions in a nuanced and sophisticated way. He interrogated the questions from various angles and discussed their implications critically, showing the many problems they entailed. His approach was that of philosophical mysticism, and he cited eminent mystics, such as Jāmī, al-Shādhilī, and Ibn 'Arabī, as well as eminent Eastern illuminationist philosophers, such as al-Dawānī, al-Shīrāzī, and Mīr Ḥusayn. The crux of his response was that these were unanswerable questions and their pursuit was rather futile.

In contrast to 'Abd al-Ghanī's inquiry, which focuses on the universal and the absolute, al-Kasbī seems to give precedence to the confined and the particular: "There is nothing but the confined that dissolves into the absolute; and the particular in the general, as a form in matter, the end of which can never be realised." Pointing to the inherent dilemma in this polarity, he wrote, referring to the "universal aspect" (*jiha*) that 'Abd al-Ghanī was inquiring about: "the 'intellectual aspect' (*al-jiha al-'aqliyya*) does not designate the target, and the 'sensible aspect' (*al-jiha al-ḥissiyya*) does not adequately convey the form of the beloved."

Referring to 'Abd al-Ghanī's proposition regarding the manifestation of universal designations, al-Kasbī said that when we say:

...these were manifested from their "affirmed designation" (*ta'ayyunuhā al-thubūtī*) ... into realising their "existential designation" (*ta'ayyunuhā al-wujūdī*)—if by "manifestation" (*zuhūr*) we mean the opposite of "concealment" (*khafā*)—then this is an incorrect statement with regard to being, because these [designations] were never manifested nor will ever be manifested, definitely as confirmed by consensus and knowledge.

As for the "affirmed designations," which are none other than Ibn 'Arabī's "Affirmed Essences" (*a'yān thābita*), discussed above, al-Kasbī defines them as "the realities themselves considered in one's conjecture (*wahm*)."<sup>1</sup> These realities, he adds, are non-existent originally, neither in the real sense, because it is impossible, nor in the sense of their attachment to being, because in their conceptual mode they have no attachment to being at all. Furthermore, searching into the nature of beings and universal designations, al-Kasbī argues, leads us to searching into the nature of being. Yet, since being is something that includes no otherness, it simply cannot be searched into. Also, since universal designation (*ta'ayyun*) is only conceptual and non-existent, thinking cannot grasp non-existence. Metaphorically, however, universal designations are distancing meanings in the mind that emerge into being through other things. Thus, he adds, our profound reflection (*nazar*) can be attached only to the simple being that conceals the conceptual essences, while our conjecture (*wahm*) can only perceive the forms of these meanings, which are separators, definers, and figures.

In many ways, al-Kasbī's position overlaps with Ibn Taymiyya's on negating the affirmation of the non-existent essences in non-existence (*'adam*), showing the enduring influence of the latter's theology. Interestingly, however, it also shows how informative and constructive

such a debate can be once stripped from Ibn Taymiyya's intolerant dogmatism and ideological fundamentalism.

In response to al-Kasbī's elaborated critique, 'Abd al-Ghanī clarified the notion of "affirmation" (*thubūt*) with regard to universal designations, raising a valid point that neither al-Kasbī nor Ibn Taymiyya dwelt upon in their critiques. The polarity of existence and non-existence (*al-wujūd wa al-'adam*), 'Abd al-Ghanī argues, should not be conflated with the polarity of affirmation and negation (*al-thubūt wa al-naḥī*) because they are of different orders. When the two polarities are conflated, affirmation coincides with existence, leading to misunderstanding. To illustrate his point he presents the following example:

The palm tree, for example, is affirmed in the date pit and not negated from it. However, the plum or apricot tree is negated from that pit and not affirmed in it, despite the fact that neither the palm tree, nor the plum tree, nor the apricot tree exists in the pit in the first place. All of these are non-existent in the pit. Thus, both affirmed and non-affirmed essences share in their being possible designations, and while not every possible is affirmed, every affirmed is possible.

'Abd al-Ghanī's point here is that once God's knowledge and not ignorance is taken as the basis of creation, then this necessarily leads to the conceptual—not existential—affirmation of the known, whatever the nature of that known may be. "It is in this sense that the Affirmed Essences are themselves called designations," 'Abd al-Ghanī explains, "because they were designated by knowledge, whereby they became differentiated from one another."