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**Chapter Author(s):** Cyrus Ali Zargar

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# TRANSCENDING CHARACTER AND THE QUEST FOR UNION: THE PLACE OF UNION (*AL-JAMʿ*) IN COMMENTARIES ON ANṢĀRĪ'S WAYSTATIONS

*Cyrus Ali Zargar*

## Introduction

Abū Ismāʿīl ʿAbdallāh al-Harawī al-Anṣārī's (d. 481/1089) *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn ilā al-ḥaqq* (*Waystations of the Travelers to the Real*) offers an arrangement for one hundred detailed yet enigmatic modes of ethical perfection ending in union with the divine. Much of the text's success lies in the author's ability to structure the various waystations that are the subject of the work. In al-Anṣārī's one hundred short chapters, each waystation leads to the next and yet also relates to those waystations proximate to it, giving readers a sense of cohesion lacking in other similar manuals on the science of the Sufi states and stations. Al-Anṣārī (or, simply, Anṣārī) presents the transformation of the human subject as an evolution that begins with awareness—becoming “awakened” to one's shortcomings and one's need for God—followed by a progression that can be divided into two halves. The first half, the former part of the journey, requires seeking completion of the soul, or acquiring excellent character traits. The second half, the latter part of the journey, requires “being sought,” that is, removing qualities of selfhood in order to receive divine qualities.

Anṣārī places the refinement of human character traits, what we would call “the virtues,” toward the middle of one’s journey, following in this placement models of the Sufi states and stations that preceded him. By considering the structure and logic of Anṣārī’s waystations, readers of Sufi texts can appreciate the place of the refinement of character traits as transitional. The wayfarer proceeds from a perfection of the bodily heart to a more receptive and sublime perfection of the spirit, from action to reception. That receptive state ultimately becomes union (*al-jamʿ*), which Anṣārī calls “the terminus of the stations of the wayfarers and the outermost, coastal portion of the ocean of *tawḥīd*,” that is, it is the periphery of knowing God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*), that side or edge of God’s oneness accessible to humans.<sup>1</sup> In this, Anṣārī frames the Sufi stations as a pathway to union and direct knowledge. While this structure, one leading to union, proved inspiring to many commentators, it also aroused the condemnation of two Ḥanbalī thinkers who opposed what some have called “monist” (or, from their perspective, *al-itihādīyya*, the “People of Unification”) resonances in Islamic ethics, namely, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Shams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, weighty epistemological differences come out in the various commentaries despite the brevity of Anṣārī’s treatise. The key concern here will be to consider commentators’ responses to the structure of Anṣārī’s treatise vis-à-vis its most disputed proclamation—namely, that the waystations end with union with God.

As one of the foremost Ḥanbalī scholars of the East, residing in Nishapur and Balkh, Anṣārī trained a generation of spiritual aspirants and ḥadīth scholars, often raising controversy for his public repudiations of speculative theology. While a number of very influential texts have been attributed to him, some in Persian, the only text verified indisputably as his and which we know he meant to be distributed in writing is the Arabic *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn ilā al-ḥaqq*, or, simply, the *Waystations*.<sup>3</sup> This treatise has been considered by writers in the Sufi tradition to be the preeminent text outlining the path to human completion. The subject of numerous commentaries, Anṣārī’s detailed description of the one hundred ethical stages to unity with the divine has been noted for its precision, incorporation of the insights of previous writers, structure, and insightful observations on the human condition. The text had wide appeal among Muslim intellectuals of varying

1. Anṣārī, *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn* (Tehran: Mawlā, 2010), 282. This paper will cite Muḥammad ‘Ammār Mufid’s dual-language edition (Arabic-Persian) of *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn*, as in the bibliography, though only the Arabic portion pertains here. There is a commonly available Arabic-only edition, edited by Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwa ‘Awad (Cairo: Maktabat Jaʿfar al-Ḥadītha, 1977), but Mufid’s edition is more exacting and has made use of multiple manuscripts. Indeed, Mufid, with the help of Rawān Farḥādī, made use of and improved the edition of the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, published in 1962 (Cairo), edited and translated (into French) by Serge de Beaurecueil. This 1962 edition replaced an uncritical edition published in Cairo in 1909 by Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda. The manuscripts used by de Beaurecueil numbered forty-one, and in his long French introduction to this edition, he includes an analysis of the merits and challenges they present. While usually accurate, de Beaurecueil’s French translation does not always aim for clarity. There is also an English translation, published in 2011 by Dar Albouraq (Paris), undertaken by Hisham Rifai. For clarity and consistency, however, all translations of the *Manāzil* and other texts in this paper are my own.

2. Sometimes Ibn Qayyim’s readings, like contemporary scholars of religion who read Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology as a sort of “pantheism,” seem to miss the importance of transcendence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought and the emphasis placed therein on the essential dissimilarities between God and creation. On this, see Mohammed Rustom, “Is Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Ontology Pantheistic?” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 2 (2006): 53–67, especially pp. 66–7.

3. See Bo Utas, “The *Munājāt* or *llāhī-nāmah* of ‘Abdu’llāh Anṣārī,” in *Manuscripts of the Middle East*, ed. Jan Just Witkam, co-edited by J. T. P. De Bruijn and Barbara Flemming, vol. 3 (papers read at the Symposium on Textual Tradition and the Editing of Persian and Turkish Texts, Leiden, 16–18 October 1986) (Leiden: Ter Lugt Press, 1988, 83–87, here p. 83 especially).

and even opposing ethical-theoretical perspectives; the commentaries discussed below are a testament to that.<sup>4</sup>

*Waystations* puts on display its author's erudition in four traditional sciences: the Sufi "states" and "stations," practical Islamic ethics, Quranic exegesis, and, in terms of the terseness of its style, Arabic rhetoric. To clarify, "states" (*al-ahwāl*) refer to passing conditions of the soul one experiences on the spiritual journey. Such states contribute to more lasting conditions, which the Sufis call "stations" (*al-maqāmāt*). When seen in terms of a progression in which an individual passes from station to station, these lasting conditions are called "waystations," (*manāzil*). Sufi writers derive the language of stations and waystations from classical Arabic poetry, which described a journey wherein the poet would stop at the deserted campgrounds (or "waystation," *manzil*) where he once had encountered his beloved. It is also noteworthy that classical Arabic used the phrase "waystations" (*manāzil*) to catalogue the "mansions" of the moon, which references the moon's locations relative to certain stars for each of the approximately twenty-eight days of its orbit around the earth. There is little evidence that Anṣārī had this mapping of the moon, often used for talismans, in mind at all. Metaphorically speaking, however, to think of the human soul as progressing through a moon-like waxing and waning describes quite elegantly Anṣārī's structure: the soul becomes complete through traits, and then retreats into union, shedding the traits it cultivated.

Commentaries on and adaptations of this text have become more widely read than the text itself. On one hand, drawing from Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) school of philosophical Sufism, there are the commentaries of ʿAfīf al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) and ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 736/1335), to name the two most well-known.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there is the very long commentary by Shams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim, written less to explain Anṣārī's treatise than to rectify it. Its title is *Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil iyyāka naʿbud wa iyyāka nastaʿīn* (Ranks of the Wayfarers Between the Waystations of "You we worship" and "You we beseech for aid"). This book has become popular of recent and is among the most popular spiritual treatises in Sunni Islam today because of renewed interest in its author, a student of Ibn Taymiyya, but also, no doubt, because of the literary and ethical merits of the book itself. Interpreting Anṣārī's *Waystations*—for Ibn Qayyim—is not only about resolving ambiguities in the text, but also about debating the proper function of Sufi interpretation vis-à-vis theological doctrine and Sharia—that is, God's revealed system of beliefs, prescriptions, and boundaries.

4. An excellent discussion of the states (*al-ahwāl*) and their relationship to the stations (*al-maqāmāt*) or waystations (*al-manāzil*) can be found in Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 77–81.

5. On that school, see Mukhtar H. Ali, *Philosophical Sufism: An Introduction to the School of Ibn al-ʿArabī* (London: Routledge, 2021) and Mohammed Rustom, "Philosophical Sufism," *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Richard C. Taylor and Luis Xavier López-Farjeat (New York: Routledge, 2016), 399–411. For the larger context of Ibn al-ʿArabī's intellectual contributions, see Caner K. Dagli, *Ibn al-ʿArabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

## Early Sufi Writings on Character

It is important, first, to establish the ways in which Anṣārī himself was writing a commentary of sorts, or at least an elaboration, on the earlier tradition. The reverence he had for that earlier tradition can be assumed even though he probably did not compose, at least not directly, the Persian hagiographical text traditionally attributed to him, the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* (*Generations of the Sufis*).<sup>6</sup> Still, that text, the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*—based on lecture notes from his circle—represents discussions of virtuous Sufi saints honored within Anṣārī’s school. While he revered those saints, Anṣārī saw a missed opportunity to comment on the Sufi paths of ethical completion. Anṣārī took issue with what existed, with the writings of these bygone saints on the science of the heart, in that they failed to elaborate fully on its stations, contenting themselves with very general principles. Either that or, Anṣārī noted, they told stories of saints devoid of any generally applicable theory. When some earlier writers did present theories of ethical development, Anṣārī complained, it was not clear in their writings what applied to the masses and what to the elite. Some mistakenly made use of the ecstatic utterances of drunken Sufis—such as Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875) and Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922). Such utterances could not be applied to the science of stations. Most Sufi writers, Anṣārī lamented, did not think of the stations in any sort of systematic way at all, as part of a charted progression.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his objections to the deficiencies of those earlier treatises, Anṣārī’s text shows quite an indebtedness to them. One of the earliest such texts is the *Ādāb al-‘ibādāt* (*Rules of Conduct for Worshipful Acts*) of Shaqīq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Balkhī (d. 194/810).<sup>8</sup> Shaqīq’s four stages include renunciation (*zuhd*), fear of God (*khawf*), desire for Paradise (*al-shawq ilā al-janna*), and the love for God (*al-maḥabba li-Allāh*). This marks out a path that one still sees—in its most general sense—by the time Anṣārī writes in the fifth/eleventh century. The path begins with acts of asceticism and worship, but ends in love, to which Anṣārī will add union. A similar pattern exists in the very short treatise, *the Stations of Hearts* (*Risālat Maqāmāt al-qulūb*) by the early tenth-century writer Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Nūrī (d. 295/907). Al-Nūrī hailed from Herat, like Anṣārī, and, like him, was interested in structured presentations of the path, even if much simpler than what Anṣārī presented almost two centuries later:

The stations of hearts are four because God Himself named the heart with four terms: breast (*ṣadr*), heart (*qalb*), hidden heart (*fu’ād*), and core (*lubb*). The breast is the mine of submission (*islām*) for He has said, exalted be He, “What of the one whose breast God has expanded for submission . . . ?” [Q 39:22]. The heart is the mine of belief (*īmān*), for He has said, “But God has made belief beloved of you and rendered it beautiful within

6. On the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, see Jawid Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmi* (London: Curzon, 2001), chapter 3.

7. Anṣārī, *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn*, 4.

8. Annabel Keeler has recently brought into question the authenticity of the title of this treatise, raising the possibility that it was added by a later copyist. See Annabel Keeler, “The Concept of *adab* in Early Sufism with Particular Reference to the Teachings of Sahl b. ‘Abdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896),” *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi adab*, ed. Francesco Chiabottini, Eve Feuillebois-Pierunek, Catherine Meyeur-Jaouen, and Luca Patrizi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 63–101, here p. 65n25.

your hearts” [Q 49:7]. The hidden heart is the mine of intimate knowledge (*maʿrifa*), for He has said, “The hidden heart did not lie about what he saw” [Q 53:11, referencing the Prophet’s vision on the Miʿrāj]. And the core is the mine of recognizing oneness [*tawhīd*], for He has said, “Signs for those possessing cores of reasoning” [Q 3:190].<sup>9</sup>

Here one notices two striking similarities to Anṣārī’s later text, as well as, thereby, the commentaries and expansions on Anṣārī that followed. First, there is the progression from submission to a realization of God’s oneness. Anṣārī interprets this as transcending human traits to achieve near unity with God. After a long process of striving, one can see God in things. Moreover, after learning how to see, one then can *unsee*—relinquishing that vision for a sense of unity. Second, there is the use of Quranic verses in a careful way that assumes universal significance for Sufi technical terms. After all, al-Nūrī’s readings rely on the differences between these terms for heart as part of a progression. This same distinction between these terms for “heart” in Arabic can be found in the *Bayān al-farq bayn al-ṣadr wa-l-qalb wa-l-fuʿād wa-l-lubb* (*An Elucidation on the Difference between the Breast, Heart, Seat-of-Passion, and Human Core*) attributed to al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 300/912), but which might also belong to al-Nūrī.<sup>10</sup> In al-Nūrī’s text, the text quoted above, each of these mines, or sources, for an ethical trait is also a vessel for that reality. Each trait begins in its corresponding rendition of the heart, but emanates from that dimension of the heart as well. *Tawhīd*, for al-Nūrī, is to declare God transcendent (*tanzīh*) from any understanding (*darkihi*). This comes after affirming God (*ithbāt al-Ḥaqq*) in his sublime attributes and beautiful names, again a pattern that will appear with Anṣārī.

Like Anṣārī’s treatise, the germinal declarations of al-Nūrī occur in a social context that might help us understand why there was such interest in mapping out the spiritual path so scientifically and so carefully. Al-Nūrī wrote in eastern Iran at a time of great competitiveness when it came to programs of piety. This was especially pronounced in Nishapur, where the Malāmatīyya and Karrāmiyya schools had been in competition, and where Baghdadī Sufism was becoming more prevalent. Literature on the Sufi stations began at the end of the second century Hijrī, or the early ninth century of the Common Era, and represented a staking out of authority regarding maps of the path. This has some similarities to the way in which Anṣārī actively presented his *Waystations* as the ultimate causatum of intense and inspired hadith study. Anṣārī wrote as an avid advocate of the Ḥanbalī approach to Islamic learning, hadith-based and opposed to theological speculation, especially the speculation of the Ashʿarīs whose influence in Nishapur waxed and waned depending on the predispositions of whoever ruled. From prison to exile, Anṣārī found himself at the center of this conflict—or, rather, thrust himself into the center of the conflict and was perceived as especially threatening to the

9. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nūrī, *Risālat Maqāmāt al-qulūb*, ed. Paul Nwyia, as in “Textes mystiques in édités d’Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Nūrī (m. 295/907),” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph*, 44:9 (1968), 117–154, here p. 92.

10. See Ḥakīm Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad Tirmidhī (attrib.), *Bayān al-farq bayn al-ṣadr wa-l-qalb wa-l-fuʿād wa-l-lubb*, tr. with introduction by Nicholas Heer and Kenneth L. Honerkamp, in *Three Early Sufi Texts* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 57.

theologians on account of his prominence.<sup>11</sup> His relationship with the famous vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), an advocate of the Ash‘arīs, but also a pragmatist, had its ups and downs precisely because of Anṣārī’s popularity as a Ḥanbalī teacher. Adversarial methods and schools, of course, continued into the era of commentaries, when it became a matter of claiming Anṣārī’s discoveries, either for philosophically-inclined Sufism or later Ḥanbalī approaches, and not a matter of contesting with the scholar himself.

There are other earlier treatises that might have helped shape Anṣārī’s *Waystations*, such as that attributed to Muḥammad Niffarī (d. ca. 366/976–7), or the *Book of Flashes* (*al-Luma‘*) by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), specifically a section therein titled “The Book of States and Stations.”<sup>12</sup> Most interesting is one such text called *The Roads of the Knowers* (*Manāhij al-‘ārifīn*) by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021). Al-Sulamī begins with a sort of awakening, one that he calls a “rousing from heedlessness,” that resembles Anṣārī’s first waystation of “awakening” (*yaqza*). Like al-Nūrī before him and Anṣārī after him, al-Sulamī’s progression has the human being engage in striving, to be followed by a more receptive purification.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most important, al-Sulamī divides the path into three major categories. There are acts of good conduct (*ādāb*), followed by character traits (*akhlāq*), finally followed by spiritual states (*aḥwāl*). While traits are acquired, states are received.<sup>14</sup> The contrast between acquisition and divine bestowal (the very dynamic one finds in al-Sulamī) allows Anṣārī to create a much more complex structure of the stations that is, in the end, based on this model.

## The Structure of the *Waystations*

It is the structure of Anṣārī’s text, in fact, coupled with its brevity, that has made it so worthy of commentary, judging from the expressed interests of the commentators themselves. Each of the one hundred waystations represents a separate mode of ethical completion, and yet each is related to the preceding waystation, to the next waystation, and even to waystations in distant parts of the treatise. There are three major divisions to consider in the book:

1. First, in the introduction to his *Waystations*, Anṣārī divides his readership into two different groups: those who seek (*murīd*) and those who are sought (*murād*), declaring all those who espouse some other way to God’s proximity to be false claimants.<sup>15</sup> The seeker (*murīd*) strives before God,

11. Serge de Laugier de Beaurecueil, *Khwādja ‘Abdullāh Anṣārī (396–481 H./1006–1089); mystique Ḥanbalite* (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), 87–9.

12. For an English translation of the former, see Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffārī, *The Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd L’-Jabbār al-Niffārī: with other Fragments*, tr. Arthur John Arberry (London: Trustees of the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial, 1978).

13. See al-Sulamī, *Majmū‘at Āthār ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī*, ed. Nasrollah Pourjavady and Muḥammad Sūrī (Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy and the Institute of Islamic Studies at the Free University of Berlin, 2009), 2:135–157, here p. 2:143–5. The *Manāhij* as reprinted here was originally edited by Etan Kohlberg in 1979.

14. Al-Sulamī, *Majmū‘at Āthār*, 2:156–7. See also Bidārfar’s introduction in ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sā‘irīn*, ed. Muḥsin Bidārfar (Qum: Bidār, 2006), 17. Later developments in Sufi ethics further established the state (*ḥāl*) as a temporary and bestowed condition of the heart. See Atif Khalil, “Ḥāl,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Leiden: Brill, Online, forthcoming.

15. Anṣārī, *Manāzil* 4.

impelled by love, guarded by modesty, and wavering between the two extremes of fear of God's displeasure and hope in God's mercy. The sought (*murād*) has made it to the beginning phases of union, progressing closer and closer, and eventually relinquishing all that he or she has accomplished in favor of absolute self-loss. In this process, fear and hope become replaced by contraction and expansion of the heart.<sup>16</sup> One becomes less concerned with extrinsic chastisements and rewards and more concerned with God's distance and nearness. The struggles at the very highest waystations have to do with moving beyond one's own erasure in unification with the Real. Thus, the waystations proceed from activity to receptivity, from seeking completion of the soul to being sought, or from *willing* changes to oneself to realizing God's will for oneself. One goes from acquiring virtuous traits to negating those traits of the self to see them replaced by the traits of God.

2. Second, there is the grouping of the one hundred waystations into clusters of ten. This too hints at precision. One can see the path as a progression from preliminaries to gateways, to interactions, then character traits, followed by foundations, then valleys, states, modes of sainthood, realities, and finally the ultimate attributes. These are the ten major groupings, but within each are ten stations. If one stops at any of the stations, it is just a station, a *maqām*; but if one is passing through, learning from that station to reach higher stations, then it becomes a *manzil*, or a waystation.
3. The third division, one that occurs in each of his one hundred chapters, is between three ranks. In the later chapters, those three ranks represent three ranks of those who have reached the status of being "sought." That is, they are three ranks for achieved or advanced wayfarers, describing nuances therein. In the earlier stations, those three ranks describe the differences between beginners, advanced, and elite wayfarers. Beginners—in accordance with al-Anṣārī's Ḥanbalī intellectual proclivities—are encouraged to abide by the literal prescriptions of the prophetic narrations (*aḥādīth*). Advanced and elite wayfarers, however, are to accept an invitation to become godlike. This classical tripartite distinction—*al-ʿamma*, *al-khāṣṣa*, and *khāṣṣat al-khāṣṣa*, that is, between beginner, advanced, and elite—was used by others well before Anṣārī.<sup>17</sup> What makes it remarkable here, though, is that he applies a threefold division to each chapter, despite the fact that he has already divided his book into two parts, as well as into ten sections, and into one hundred waystations.

Such intentionality and complexity might help explain why commentators might have embraced the challenge of elucidating this manual, as well as why aspirants would have needed commentaries. More than simply intending elucidation, commentators found this framework an ideal model for advancing interpretations

16. Anṣārī, *Manāzil* 142, no. 44. As William Chittick indicates, love frames the entirety of Anṣārī's stations and is located as a later waystation (no. 61) only because of the preliminaries involved. See Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 292–3. Mukhtar Ali has discussed the topic of love in Anṣārī's ethical system, as treated by commentators (especially Kāshānī), in "The 'Doctrine of Love' in 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-sāʿirīn* with Critical Paraphrase of 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī's Commentary," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 140–155.

17. See Jonathan A. C. Brown, "The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī's Letter to the Seljuq Vizier and Commentary," *The Muslim World* 96, no. 1 (2006): 89–113. Abū al-Faḍl Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. 520/1126), who dedicated himself to Anṣārī's unfinished Quran commentary, mentions the existence of this threefold division among earlier Sufis. See Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161–2.



of Islam, interpretations that often dealt with matters more detailed than those that occur in Anṣārī's work. So, for example, the Akbarian commentator 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. ca. 736/1335) divides Anṣārī's treatise into three parts.<sup>18</sup> The first part deals with the soul, the *nafs*. The second part deals with the heart, the *qalb*. And the final part deals with the spirit, the *rūḥ*. His use of the first two of these three terms—as he himself admits—relies on a Sufi psychology with resonances in Arabic philosophy: In his commentary on the *Waystations*, al-Kāshānī tells us that the Sufi conception of heart (*al-qalb*) can also be called “the rational soul” (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqā*), using a philosophical term to describe this “incorporeal intermediary between the realm of divinity and the realm of creation.”<sup>19</sup> Aware of a growing body of shared terms and concepts between philosophy and Sufism, al-Kāshānī elsewhere explains that the Sufi term for “soul” (*al-nafs*) largely corresponds to that which a philosopher (*al-ḥakīm*) might call the “animal soul” or “animal spirit,” namely, the “vaporous substance that bears the faculty of life, love, and volitional movement.”<sup>20</sup> Al-Kāshānī recognizes and to some extent advances parallels between Sufi and philosophical psychological terms. His interpretation of the *Waystations* hence relies on a more terminologically defined and even philosophically influenced psychology than that presented by al-Nūrī or by Anṣārī and yet remains fully justified by his reading of Anṣārī's work. Al-Kāshānī can thus proceed as though Anṣārī intuited these complexities, stating them entirely by implication, even if the letter of the book presents a more simplified psychology.<sup>21</sup>

## Chapter Ninety-Nine of the *Waystations*: On Union

Points of variance regarding Anṣārī's structure of ethical development stand out in relief at the second-to-last waystation, Chapter 99, that of “union” or *al-jam'*. Anṣārī begins this chapter, as he does every other chapter, with a quotation from the Quran, here Q 8:17: “You did not throw, when you threw, but it was God who threw.” Even before entering upon his discussion, the import of juxtaposing this verse with the topic of union makes its meaning clear. Muhammad has become so devoid of human selfhood that his action is God's action—God throws when he throws. It is not to say, of course, that God somehow acts through the Prophet, but rather, that Muhammad has realized God's omnipresence in his actions. Muhammad has become aware that God is the actor in a way that the spiritual wayfarer should imitate. This verse confirms one of the more controversial claims within Sufism, namely, that a person can achieve some sort of union in which he or she becomes virtually stripped of human subjectivity. Rendering the passage even

18. An excellent example of the style and method of al-Kāshānī's commentary appears in Ali, “*Futuwwa* as the Noblest Character Traits (*Makārim al-akhlāq*) in Anṣārī's *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* with al-Kāshānī's Commentary,” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4, no. 1-2 (2020): 8–24.

19. Al-Kāshānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sā'irīn*, 424.

20. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Sūfiyya, wa yaṭhi Rashḥ al-zulāl fi sharḥ al-alfāz al-mutadāwala bayn arbāb al-adhwāq wa-l-aḥwāl*, ed. 'Āsim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī al-Ḥusaynī al-Shādhilī al-Darqāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005), 82.

21. I discuss Anṣārī's own psychology in Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 212–3.

more tantalizing for later Akbarian commentators, Anṣārī uses the term *wujūd* in his elaboration of this waystation, though what he means by that requires elaboration. Before discussing varying interpretations of this chapter and ways in which it helps us understand models of ethical development among Sufi commentators, let us consider the chapter itself.

What follows is a translation of the entire chapter on “union,” Chapter 99 of the *Waystations*.

God, mighty and glorified, has said, “You did not throw, when you threw, but it was God who threw” (Q 8:17). Union (*al-jamʿ*) occurs when separations fall away and when the need for indications ends. A person rises above the water and clay from which he or she is composed after confirmation of what has been established [in terms of the wayfarer’s perceptive experiences] and after distancing oneself from all ongoing variations. It occurs after the person has nothing to do with witnessing secondary entities, after terminating one’s sense of being between two things [sensory and supersensory, created and eternal], and after the termination of one’s witnessing of God’s witnessing of these things.

Union has three degrees: Union of knowing, followed by union of finding, and then union of identifying. The union of knowing is the gradual disappearance of the varieties of knowledge relating to what testifies [about God], replaced entirely by immediate, God-given knowledge (*al-ʿilm al-ladunni*). The union of finding is the gradual disappearance of what occurred for the person in the final stages of connection [*al-itṭiṣāl*, at the eighty-ninth waystation, described earlier] in terms of self-annihilation, completely effaced, instead, in the very source of finding. The union of identifying is the gradual disappearance of anything that might be conveyed through indication within the very actuality of the Real. Union is the terminus of the stations of the wayfarers and the outermost, coastal portion of the ocean of *tawḥīd* [realizing God’s oneness].<sup>22</sup>

This is an especially difficult passage in large part because of its concision. Much of that concision does not come through because, in order to render this passage comprehensible, I have had to take liberties and add a number of words and phrases. It is also difficult because its topic—the final stage of what might guardedly be called “mystical experience”—escapes description even according to the author himself. Let us consider, then, the commentators, beginning with one Akbarian commentator who makes free use of terms and concepts from the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī. Throughout this paper, I have referred in passing to the commentary of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, whose approach resembles the commentator I consider next insofar as both authors embrace Anṣārī’s structure but also bring it into their distinctively philosophical Sufi tradition, the Akbarian tradition. This commentator—Sulaymān ibn ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh al-Qūmī al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291)—lived about half a century earlier than al-Kāshānī. More important, his commentary was circulating among the students of Ibn Taymiyya. Read alongside

22. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 281–282.

Ibn Qayyim's reaction to it, al-Tilimsānī's commentary provides a telling setting in which to consider the structure of the *Waystations* with "union" as its terminus.

## Al-Tilimsānī's Reading of Anṣārī's Waystation of Union

Al-Tilimsānī, as indicated by his name, was known by the city in which he was born, Tlemcen, as well as the Berber tribe to which he belonged, al-Qūmī. He is referenced most often as 'Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī.<sup>23</sup> He represents, in his writing, the direction that the Akbarian school of theoretical Sufism would take, namely, its use of philosophically informed vocabulary along with its emphasis on the terms and methods that had become established in Sufism. His companionship with Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1273–4), Ibn al-'Arabī's foremost disciple and stepson, places him well within that circle of commentators who would influence generations of metaphysically minded Sufis to come. The texts upon which he focused received commentaries by other Akbarian scholars as well—the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*Bezels of Wisdom*) of Ibn al-'Arabī, the poem by 'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) known as *Nazm al-Sulūk* (*The Poem on Wayfaring*), and also known as *al-Ṭā'iyya al-kubrā* (*the Greater Poem Rhyming in "Ṭ"*), and, his commentary on the *Kitāb al-Mawāqif* (*Book of Standings*) of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. ca. 354/965), which stays true to Ibn 'Arabī's interest in al-Niffarī.<sup>24</sup> While some have attributed to him a commentary on a poem on the human soul attributed to Abū 'Alī Ḥusayn ibn Sinā, or Avicenna (d. 428/1037), Yousef Casewit makes the case that this attribution is farfetched.<sup>25</sup> Aside from a *dīwān* of poetry and a short treatise on Arabic prosody, his other two compositions are also commentaries: one on the first chapter of the Quran (and part of the second), and one on the divine names.<sup>26</sup> Yet al-Tilimsānī's most prominent composition—one that would serve as a model to other adherents to Ibn 'Arabī's thought commenting on the *Manāzil*—was his commentary on Anṣārī's treatise.<sup>27</sup>

Al-Tilimsānī's reading of Anṣārī's chapter on union is best represented by his gloss on the very first part of Anṣārī's definition of union. "Union (*al-jam'*)," according to Anṣārī, "occurs when separations (*al-tafriqa*) falls away." Al-Tilimsānī comments that what falls away is the differentiation (*al-farq*) between Being (*al-wujūd*) and existent things (*al-mawjūd*).<sup>28</sup> This occurs from the perspective of the one who

23. See Bidārfar's introduction to al-Tilimsānī's commentary for the biographical information I offer in this paragraph. See 'Afif al-Dīn Sulaymān al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sā'irin*, ed. Muḥsin Bidārfar (Qum: Bidār, 2011), 1:46–52.

24. See Paul Nwyia, "Une cible d'Ibn Taimiyya: Le moniste al-Tilimsānī (m. 690/1291)," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 30 (1978): 127–145.

25. My appreciation goes to Yousef Casewit for his comments on details concerning al-Tilimsānī as well as for sharing an early draft of his introduction to a translation of al-Tilimsānī's *Ma'āni al-asmā' al-ilāhiyya* (forthcoming in the Library of Arabic Literature, New York University Press). A number of biographical notes on al-Tilimsānī included here come from this aforementioned introduction. The commentary on Avicenna is attributed to al-Tilimsānī in Bidārfar's introduction, al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sā'irin*, 1:46–52. Orkhan Musakhanov attributes the commentary to al-Tilimsānī while raising doubts about Avicenna's authorship of the poem on the soul. See his introduction to al-Tilimsānī, *Me'āni'l-esmā'il-ilāhiyye* (*Ma'āni al-asmā' al-ilāhiyya*), ed. with an introduction by Orkhan Musakhanov (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2017), 35–6.

26. Again, see Casewit's introduction to al-Tilimsānī.

27. Casewit numbers the total commentaries on Anṣārī's treatise to twelve, with al-Tilimsānī's serving as "an inspiration for many of the others."

28. Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil al-sā'irin*, 2:693.

witnesses, the *mushāhid*—that is, the perceiver of supersensory things in the forms of sensory things. This notion of perception is a pivotal concept in the school of Ibn al-‘Arabī: a person discovers, through the imagination and through perception, what corresponds to a reality beyond sensory perception. The lifting of differentiation is why, in al-Tilimsānī’s readings of the words of Anṣārī, “the need for indications ends.” There is no need to indicate, or allude, to things when the gap between existence and the existent has been closed. Of course, by *wujūd*, Anṣārī does not mean “existence” or “Being,” in the philosophical sense developed by Ibn ‘Arabī. Avicenna had established that *wujūd* or “existence” was self-evident and could be categorized as necessary, possible, or impossible.<sup>29</sup> For Avicenna, God was the Necessary Existent, whose self-love permeated a universe of possible existents—that is, all existent things. This claim shaped the way others after him—especially Sufis willing to engage with Avicennan philosophy—would read the word *wujūd*.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, for Sufis using the term *wujūd* before this shift, or for those with no interest in the philosophical sense of *wujūd* as existence, the term signified an ecstatic finding. One sees this usage (ecstatic finding) clearly in the writings of Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī Hujwīrī (d. ca 465/1071–72), to give two prominent examples.<sup>31</sup> Even with certain later figures, such as Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221), the term *wujūd* references an experiential state, a realization—that is, an ecstatic finding and only, perhaps, rarely “existence.”<sup>32</sup> It was Ibn ‘Arabī who most famously brought these two usages into correspondence, so that a knower-of-God’s awareness can unlock a cosmological reality of the emanation of God’s essential being through His attributes: ecstatic finding occurs when one transcends a false sense of selfhood, realizing instead that all is the Real. In other words, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, *both* senses of *wujūd* appear, and his students or the students of his students—such as al-Tilimsānī—wrote and commented on writings in a manner strongly influenced by the marriage of these two usages of *wujūd*. Anṣārī’s intended meaning vis-à-vis *wujūd* is no mystery, as he spells it out quite clearly in Chapter 96 of the *Waystations*. He clarifies this using three instances of *wujūd* or its variants in the Quran, each of which describes a person finding or realizing God, followed by his own definition of *wujūd*: “*Wujūd* means successfully attaining the reality of a thing.”<sup>33</sup> While the profundity of the comments that follow are arguably unmatched by al-Qushayrī or Hujwīrī, what Anṣārī communicates remains consistent with *wujūd* as “ecstatic finding.”

For the most part, al-Tilimsānī is sensitive to the fact that *wujūd* for Anṣārī

29. Parviz Morewedge, “Philosophical Analysis and Ibn Sīnā’s ‘Essence-Existence’ Distinction,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92, no. 3 (1972): 425–435.

30. Parviz Morewedge, “The Logic of Emanationism and Ṣūfism in the Philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Part I,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, no. 4 (1971): 467–476.

31. Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. Muḥsin Bīdārfar (Qum: Bīdār, 1995), 132–133. ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, ed. Valentin A. Zhukovskii, introduction by Qāsim Anṣārī, 10th edition (Tehran: Ṭahūrī, 2008), 538–541.

32. I discuss problems of interpretation surrounding the term *wujūd* in Kubrā’s writings in my “The Ten Principles: Theoretical Implications of Volitional Death in Najm al-Dīn Kubrā’s *al-Uṣūl al-‘Ashara* (A Study and Translation),” *The Muslim World* 103, no. 1 (2013): 107–130, especially pp. 113–121. See also Gerhard Böwering, “Mystical Circles and Colors in Kubrā’s Philosophical Kaleidoscope,” in *Beyond Conventional Constructs: Essays in Honour of Professor Dr. C. A. Qadir*, ed. Ghazala Irfan (Lahore: Qadir Presentation Committee, 1987), 82–101.

33. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 273. Those verses are Q 4:110, Q 4:64, and Q 24:39.

is ethical, so that the commentator's focus is on the perceptive process of "witnessing" much more than a larger metaphysical conception of existence. He glosses Anṣārī's definition of *wujūd*—namely, "attaining the reality of a thing," as "witnessing" that thing or "becoming annihilated in it."<sup>34</sup> *Wujūd* corresponds, in al-Tilimsānī's reading of Anṣārī's three levels of *wujūd*, to levels of experiential knowledge beyond *ma'rifa* ("acquaintance") because all distance between the seeker of familiarity and the objective of that seeking has disappeared.<sup>35</sup> This ends in *fanā'*, or annihilation of the self in the Real, a point that becomes clearer in Anṣārī's chapter on "union." Indeed, for al-Tilimsānī, the path of annihilation is the shortcut of the knowers of God. This is his interpretation of Anṣārī's promise in his own introduction to the *Waystations*—that he will guide his readers to "the shortest of routes to the primordial track."<sup>36</sup> "The 'shortest of routes' for God's knowers," al-Tilimsānī comments, "occurs when the Real, may He be exalted, acquaints them with the manner in which the boundaries of their selfhood and the traces of their acts become annihilated, one after another, as they set out toward the realm of erasure."<sup>37</sup> This is indeed a highly attuned reading of the structure of Anṣārī's book; it describes precisely such a process, one ending in union.

Despite such care, however, al-Tilimsānī does occasionally read Anṣārī through an Akbarian lens. In his commentary on *wujūd*, for example, he must interpret and explain for his audience the word *wujūd* in Anṣārī's third and most achieved sense of *wujūd*: "The third rank," Anṣārī says, "is discovering a station (*wujūd maqām*) in which the trace of *wujūd* becomes obliterated by becoming drowned in primordiality."<sup>38</sup> The trace of *wujūd*—if *wujūd* is the Real—cannot become obliterated, nor would that be Anṣārī's intended meaning for al-Tilimsānī. Thus, the commentator corrects this by noting that "by *wujūd*, he probably means *mawjūd* (existent)"—that is, the trace of an existent ... disappears.<sup>39</sup> Anṣārī seems to mean more precisely, however, that it is the trace of one's ecstatic finding that disappears. What disappears is awareness of presence: Anṣārī is interested in charting a path that ends with a realization of God's oneness, omnipresence, and the transitory nature of everything else, including selfhood. While al-Tilimsānī's move toward seeing one's created or transitory nature as "existent" might seem like a minor alteration, it superimposes a metaphysical view that is neither in the text nor native to Anṣārī's ethical frame. Nevertheless, as a whole, as a commentator, unlike al-Kāshānī, al-Tilimsānī often stays close to the text, using one part of the text to explain another part, or using his vast knowledge of the many connotations of Arabic words, sometimes even obscure words. He can be a careful reader and yet still present an Akbarian perspective because, in many ways, the difference often hinges on one word. In this case, the simple move of drawing a connection between two senses of the word *wujūd*, the Sufi-ethical sense and the philosophical sense, alters the import

34. Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, 2:686.

35. Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, 2:686–7.

36. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 3.

37. Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, 1:88.

38. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 273. Al-Tilimsānī has *al-azaliyya* instead of *al-awwaliyya*—that is, "becoming drowned in pre-eternity (eternity *a parte ante*)." Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, 2:687.

39. Al-Tilimsānī, *Sharḥ Manāzil*, 2:687.

of Anṣārī's observations on union. Ibn al-ʿArabī's students, including al-Tilimsānī, saw in perspectives like Anṣārī's the metaphysical implications of realizing God's oneness and omnipresence. It is this, in part, to which Ibn Qayyim reacts in his commentary.

## Ibn Qayyim's Rebuttal to Anṣārī and al-Tilimsānī

Living about half a century after al-Tilimsānī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, from Damascus, was incredibly close to his teacher, Ibn Taymiyya, imprisoned with him during the latter's last stay in the Citadel of Damascus.<sup>40</sup> He and Ibn Taymiyya offered an interpretation of Sufism both Ḥanbalī and Junaydī in its sobriety—so sober regarding adherence to the Sunna and so skeptical regarding certain later developments in Sufi theory and practice that it sometimes has not been recognized as Sufism at all, although that has less to do with Ibn Qayyim than it does with modern and often Western expectations of Sufism.<sup>41</sup> Ibn Qayyim's interest in the shaykh from Herat began with a text called *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn wa bāb al-saʿādatayn* (*The Path of the Two Migrations and the Gate of the Two Forms of Felicity*), in which he commented on the *Waystations*, as well as on a treatise that contains portions of the *Waystations*—namely, the *Maḥāsin al-majālis* (*The Alluring Merits of [Edifying] Gatherings*) by Ibn al-ʿArīf (d. 535/1141).<sup>42</sup> Again, two journeys—just as we will see later in his *Madārij al-sālikīn* (*Ranks of the Wayfarers*, henceforth *Ranks*)—describe Ibn Qayyim's view of the path to God, which begins with worship, is followed by grace, but never becomes the ecstatic loss of selfhood that Anṣārī describes. To understand Ibn Qayyim's interest in Anṣārī, one must remember that Anṣārī was not merely a Sufi. He was a major Ḥanbalī scholar revered in Ḥanbalī prosopographies. Ibn Qayyim's project—an extension of Ibn Taymiyya's project—was to reclaim Anṣārī's charting of the pathway of spiritual perfection, which seems to have been the most celebrated version of such texts at this time, one with a reach that extended far beyond the Ḥanbalī school. Ibn Qayyim, thus, shows respect for Anṣārī, while often gently discrediting him at the same time. He quotes Ibn Taymiyya's assessment of Anṣārī as someone whose “practice was better than his knowledge.”<sup>43</sup> That is, while Anṣārī was pious, his lack of knowledge led to the sorts of misunderstandings that had crept into Sufism and into interpretations of his work.

40. Abdul Hakim I. al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School of Law and Ibn Taymiyya: Conflict or Conciliation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 132–6. See also Hasan Qasim Murad, “Ibn Taymiyya on Trial: A Narrative Account of his Miḥan,” *Islamic Studies* 18, no. 1 (1979): 1–32, here p. 24.

41. George Makdisi, “The Ḥanbalī School and Sufism,” *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas* 15 (1979): 115–126.

42. See Ovamir Anjum's introduction to Ibn Qayyim, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*, tr. with annotations and introduction by Ovamir Anjum (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:49.

43. Ovamir Anjum, “Sufism without Mysticism? Ibn Qayyim al-Ġawziyyah's Objectives in *Madārij al-Sālikīn*,” *Oriente Moderno* 90, no. 1 (2010): 153–180, here p. 164.

According to Ibn Qayyim, the most egregious of those misunderstandings was a “unifying” (or “monist,” *ittihādī*) interpretation of the soul as part of an emanational descent of being—the sort of interpretation one finds in Akbarian readings of his work. Of course, neither Ibn ‘Arabī nor those affiliated with the school of interpreters that followed him would have agreed that the unity and emanation described constituted *ittihād*; in fact, they explicitly rejected *ittihād* as a theological model.<sup>44</sup> Ibn Qayyim describes Akbarian readings of Anṣārī as perversions of the master’s intended meaning:

This [third degree of inspiration] is the sort of inspiration that, when it comes upon a person, undoes all intermediate phenomena, obliterating them and bringing them to a sort of nothingness. Nevertheless, this is in terms of witnessing [in terms of perception, *shuhūd*], not existence [not in terms of reality, *wujūd*]. The People of Unification (*al-ittihādiyya*) claim that there is a oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), and thus attribute this undoing and sense of nothingness to [the all-encompassing oneness of] existence. Moreover, they include the writer of the *Waystations* among them in sharing this view, while he is innocent of such charges in terms of his understanding, his religion (*dīn*), his spiritual state, and his acquaintance with God. God, of course, knows best.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, though, Ibn Qayyim is well-aware that Anṣārī’s structure, the very progression of the *Waystations*, has created this opportunity for Akbarians, and it is with that structure that he takes issue. Ibn Qayyim says, quoting Anṣārī, that a “contemplation on the essence of God’s oneness” that requires “disavowal” of all else is “basically the very foundation upon which he [Anṣārī] founds the path, and his book brings this path to its terminus in annihilation.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, as I have indicated throughout this paper, the underlying structure of the *Waystations* builds upon an acquisition of traits that prepares the wayfarer for a relinquishing of them, ending in self-annihilation. Ibn Qayyim disapproves of this design, a design of a manual on ethics that ends in a loss of any sense of creation, created entities, and selfhood by being absorbed in a realization of God’s oneness, for this confuses the necessary boundaries between Lord and servant:

May God have mercy on Abū Ismā‘īl [Anṣārī]. He opened the door of disbelief and atheism for the heretics, so they entered from it and “swore by God with their most powerful oaths” [Q 6:109] that he was one of them. But he was not one of them. No; rather, he was deluded by the mirage of annihilation (*al-fanā*). He mistook it for a chasm in the sea of acquaintance with God and for the utmost achievement of God’s knowers. This brought him to exaggerate the significance of realizing annihilation and maintaining it, which led him inevitably to what you see.<sup>47</sup>

44. See, as one of many examples, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 4:372. Also see Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Iraqī* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 44.

45. Shams al-Dīn ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madārīj al-sālikīn bayn manāzil “iyyāka na’bud” wa “iyyāka nasta’in*,” ed. Muḥammad al-Mu‘taṣim bi-llāh al-Baghdādī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2003), 1:73. Unfortunately, an excellent new edition of this text, edited by Ovamir Anjum, had not been published in time for me to use it here, although I have included the editor’s insights—in his introduction—as often as possible. See *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*.

46. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 1:167.

47. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 1:168.

In terms of structure, most troublesome to Ibn Qayyim, and yet paramount to Anṣārī, are the final ten of Anṣārī's *waystations*, which make up "the Section on Ultimates" (*qism al-nihāyāt*). Here, the *Waystations* culminate in the servant's utter realization of *tawḥīd* in a series of stations where he describes nuances in the undoing of selfhood, including annihilation (*al-fanāʿ*), subsistence (*al-baqāʿ*), verification (*al-taḥqīq*), attiring (*al-talbīs*), finding (*al-wujūd*), isolating (*al-tajrīd*), making singular (*al-tafrīd*), and, finally, union (*al-jamʿ*). Beyond all these lies *tawḥīd*, knowing God's oneness, which—in its most perfect sense, for Anṣārī—is a divine act exclusively: "His knowing oneness, and none else, is the knowing of His oneness / so one who describes Him can be described as a heretic."<sup>48</sup> Knowledge of oneness is God's entirely, for Anṣārī. Human knowledge of God's oneness forms "in what is learned through annihilation (*al-fanāʿ*), which is purified in what is learned through union (*al-jamʿ*), attracting them to the knowledge of oneness (*tawḥīd*) of those who have undergone union (*al-jamʿ*)."<sup>49</sup> In other words, that which lies beyond union is only intimations, intimations of *tawḥīd* accessible to those who have realized union. For Anṣārī, annihilation and union are necessary to have the highest human conception of God's oneness. It is because of this view of practical *tawḥīd*, one ending in union, that Ibn Qayyim comments that "the author of the *Waystations* has acted impetuously here."<sup>50</sup>

Ibn Qayyim offers less of an alternative to union than a refutation of misunderstandings tied to it. He begins his commentary on Chapter 99, on union, by contradicting al-Tilimsānī's interpretation, which he quotes throughout. His assessment of al-Tilimsānī, as he states elsewhere in the *Ranks*, is decidedly negative, calling him "the most extreme in taking unification as a pathway" and "the most hyperbolic and hostile to those who believe in separations [between God and creation]."<sup>51</sup> Although he admits that al-Tilimsānī is "articulate of tongue," he includes him among those "to whom God has given no light," as the Quran describes (Q 24:40), largely because al-Tilimsānī perverts Anṣārī's "union in witnessing" to support a deviant "union in existence."<sup>52</sup> With such deviance in mind, Ibn Qayyim tackles the crux of the issue he has with Anṣārī's *Waystations*, namely, union. He begins with the Quranic verse at the center of Anṣārī's discussion:

Some people say that what is meant by the verse, "You did not throw, when you threw, but it was God who threw" (Q 8:17), is a negation of the Messenger's action, attributing it instead to the Lord, exalted be He. They have rendered it, thereby, a foundation for divine compulsion, invalidating the relationship between God's servants and their own actions. . . . This reveals an error in their comprehension of the Quran. Were it a sound perspective, it would be necessary to dismiss [Muhammad's] participation in all actions, so, it would be said, "You did not pray when you prayed, or fast when you fasted, or sacrifice when you sacrificed, nor did you perform any action when you did it, but it was God performing that action."<sup>53</sup>

48. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 286.

49. Anṣārī, *Manāzil*, 285.

50. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikin*, 1:167.

51. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikin*, 1:276.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikin*, 3:394–5.



Ibn Qayyim offers, instead, an explanation that these actions originate with God, as the creator of all things. The verse is God's way of reminding His audience that behind any human military victory lie unseen divine causes. The original context of the verse is, after all, the Battle of Badr.

Ibn Qayyim's concern with such understandings of union, as well as the teleological structure of the *Waystations*, is an ethical one. The risk involved in transcending character traits and shedding acquired human qualities is related to antinomianism, as he explains in a lengthy passage.<sup>54</sup> Commentators such as al-Tilimsānī and even Anṣārī himself seem to read union in such a way that human actions have become God's actions. The problem is that if God bears responsibility for human actions, then the person aware of it would enjoy license to do whatsoever he or she wills. He clarifies this in his rebuttal to al-Tilimsānī's reading of the meaning of "union." "Union only occurs," Ibn Qayyim says, "between God's will and human seeking."<sup>55</sup> "Any sort of union that undoes the separation between Lord and servant, or Creator and created, or eternal and formed in time," Ibn Qayyim declares, "is the most invalid of invalid opinions."<sup>56</sup> Here separation is in order, he says, and it is upheld by the "people of Islam, belief, and excellent action,"—that is, *al-islām*, *al-īmān*, and *al-iḥsān*—"while those who advocate union are the people of deviance, disbelief, and paganism,"—that is, *al-ilḥād*, *al-kufr*, and *al-wathanīyya*. The problem, of course, is that it is not clear where Anṣārī should be situated in all this. His use of the verse and his definition of union seem to indicate that he prescribes, at least, a sense of visionary confusion between the identities of Lord and servant. Moreover, al-Tilimsānī does not need to do much with Anṣārī's words to bring out this sense of the text. On the other hand, Ibn Qayyim's commentary veers—for page after page—from Anṣārī into a discussion of appropriate interpretations of *tawḥīd*.

In fact, Ibn Qayyim offers a rather radical rereading of Anṣārī. He equates the terminus of the wayfarer's path not with union, but with "repentance"—translating Anṣārī's description of union into "nothing more than the perfection of the rank of servitude."<sup>57</sup> His justification for this resides in a voluntarist reading of unification (*al-ittiḥād*) and annihilation (*al-fanā*), wherein the wayfarer takes aim at becoming unified with and annihilated in God's will (*al-irāda*), and not God: "The utmost aim of love is unification between what the lover wills and what the Beloved wills, an annihilation between the will of the lover and that which the Beloved wills."<sup>58</sup> For Ibn Qayyim, one's constant focus must be on an alignment of wills without the ontological implications raised by Ibn 'Arabī or al-Tilimsānī. Ibn Qayyim is unequivocal about maintaining one's sense of distance, even in visionary matters of witnessing (*shuhūd*), which figures into his reconceptualization of annihilation. One should "witness one's worshipful servitude (*ʿubūdiyyatahu*) while also witnessing the Worshipped (*al-maʿbūd*)," never losing sight of the distance between the servant and his or her Lord. One must always remember and even

54. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 1:179–182.

55. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3:396.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3:407 for *tawba* and p. 3:408 for servitude.

58. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 1:185.

witness one's own witnessing as a result of God's kind grace.<sup>59</sup> This is what is lost among those Ibn Qayyim criticizes.

Applying this view, in the chapter on union and the chapter on *tawḥīd* that follows, he takes issue with the Muʿtazilis, the Ashʿarīs, Avicenna, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274), and the Akbarian school of thought (the “People of Unification,” *al-ittihādiyya*). Avicenna and Ṭūsī saw God as absolute existence, while the People of Unification see Him as the reality behind all created things.<sup>60</sup> The philosophers have denied God's essence as described in the scriptures.<sup>61</sup> The People of Unification have described a universe where all things are equal, stripping God's commands of any universal validity. Secretly, he says, they hold that forbidden things and actions are only forbidden to those who lack awareness of this realization of oneness.<sup>62</sup> Ibn Qayyim cites Ibn Taymiyya in arguing that all of these groups have fallen short in their understanding of the oneness of God, which must be in accordance with the Quran and the way of His prophet, or Sunna. It is a point of view commonly known today, but one that he expresses in an adversarial and even subversive tone, doubtless because of the intellectual resistance that he and his teacher faced. Fittingly, this is a resistance not unlike what Anṣārī encountered in eastern Iran, despite the differences that remain between Ibn Qayyim and his Ḥanbalī predecessor Anṣārī.

## Conclusions

A closer consideration of Ibn Qayyim's revisions of the *Waystations*, his reaction both to Anṣārī and to al-Tilmsānī's reading of Anṣārī, allows us to think about the work's structure as reflective of a larger Sufi tradition of mapping the path to perfection and, following that, to proximity with God. It becomes clear that Ibn Qayyim tackles the issue of annihilation early on in his *Ranks* so that he can reject Anṣārī's structure altogether; that is, so that union in annihilation does not serve as the terminus of the knower's journey through the waystations. His reading of annihilation as completely divorced from Akbarian assertions about existence and as mere perception relies on an argument that Ovamir Anjum has rightly described as going “beyond what might be excused as interpretive license.”<sup>63</sup> His rearrangement of the ethical journey defies not only Anṣārī's treatment, but also the texts preceding it and upon which Anṣārī based his own work to such a great extent that we can consider his commentary to be counter-canonical. Doing so allows us to appreciate the intellectual innovativeness behind Ibn Qayyim's project, a continuation of Ibn Taymiyya's, but—even more important—it also allows us to discern ways in which Anṣārī's structure gave form to an ethical program that he inherited from previous Sufi writers.

59. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 1:281.

60. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3:415.

61. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3:415.

62. Ibn Qayyim, *Madārīj al-sālikīn*, 3:416.

63. Ibn Qayyim (ed.), *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*, 56.

A final consideration of Ibn Qayyim's project is now in order. The most striking move that Ibn Qayyim makes is to shift away from annihilation and, following that, union as the terminus of the ethical path. While his issues, as he states, are both theological and moral in nature, his rejection of the Akbarian interpretation of Anṣārī would not, by necessity, have spelled a rejection of the structure and logic of the *Waystations*. Ibn Qayyim's reading of annihilation as a perceptive affair, independent of ontological matters, need not negate it as the end of the path. After all, clearly even in the longstanding Junaydī tradition—one that Ibn Qayyim reveres—annihilation is a more advanced achievement, lacking the later philosophical connotations that the Akbarians attached to it. The original master of sober and Sharia-abiding Sufism whom Ibn Qayyim calls one of the “imams of the Way,” Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910), in his treatise “*On Annihilation*” (*Kitāb al-Fanāʾ*), establishes that annihilation is a primordial state to which the knower returns, often equated, in al-Junayd's and subsequent writings, with the pre-eternal moment of fealty described in Q 7:172, when God asked the souls, “Am I not your Lord (*a-lastu bi-rabbikum*)?”<sup>64</sup> Rather, it seems, Ibn Qayyim's goal is to minimize Anṣārī's structured mapping of the waystations to union, replacing it with something grounded in his interpretation of scripture and far less dangerous. In that way, it is not a commentary at all or even a critique, but rather more along the lines of a systematic and subtle revocation or even refutation.

Yet the pull of that existing structure, amazingly, reappears in subtle ways in Ibn Qayyim's writings. He structures his commentary on the *Waystations* on two sayings, two halves of a Quranic verse: “You we worship, / and You we beseech for aid” (Q 1:5). These two halves shape the very title of his commentary: *Madārīj al-sālikīn bayn manāzil iyyāka naʿbud wa iyyāka nastaʿīn* (Ranks of the Wayfarers between the Waystations of “You we worship” and “You we beseech for aid”). Ibn Qayyim explains that “the entirety of the path can be summed up” in this one verse, just as the entirety of the Quran can be summed up in its first chapter. He refers to the two halves of this verse as “two sentences”: The first—“You we worship”—describes worship as belonging to God alone, attributing to humans striving and effort.<sup>65</sup> The second—“and You we beseech for aid”—describes a process whereby the person learns to rely on God, and where “the will of the seeker becomes one with the will of the sought.”<sup>66</sup> Were one to see this in light of Anṣārī's treatise, one might say that striving here ends, replaced by a more receptive approach to God, and the seeker becomes the sought. Instead, Ibn Qayyim's interest in framing these two as matters of reliance on God and worship of God exclusively comes through clearly throughout his commentary. Still, Ibn Qayyim's very division of the path into two parts retains hints of that longstanding Sufi structure that becomes “seeker” and “sought” in Anṣārī's language. Certainly, Ibn Qayyim must be aware, for example, of Sahl b. ʿAbdallāh al-Tustarī's (d. 283/896) interpretation of the verse Ibn Qayyim uses for his title. After all, al-Tustarī is another early Sufi figure named by Ibn Qayyim as numbering among the “imams of the Way.”<sup>67</sup> In al-Tustarī's description,

64. Al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, *Rasāʾil al-Junayd*, ed. Jamāl Rajab Sayyid-Bay (Damascus: Dār Iqraʾ, 2005), 140. For Ibn Qayyim's quotation and assessment of al-Junayd, see *Madārīj*, 1:158–9.

65. *Madārīj*, 3:409.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Madārīj*, 1:158–9.

the two halves of this verse require what might be called seeking, in the form of worship and servitude, and hoping that one will receive God's aid; that is, one might say, hoping to be sought by God for His aid:

“You we worship,” that is, we yield and are humble, confessing Your lordship, declaring Your oneness, and serving You. From this [reality] is derived the noun “servant” (*al-‘abd*). “And You we beseech for aid,” that is, aid in that with which You have tasked us, as per Your right. Yours is both the wish and the will in all that. All knowledge is Yours, and all sincerity due to You. We cannot succeed in this but by aid and direction, from You to us. Thus, there is no might for us, nor power, except from You.<sup>68</sup>

There are perhaps intimations of Anṣārī's reading of the entirety of the path as a progression between two dynamics, seeking and being sought, but (a) al-Tustarī only comments here on this verse, not on the path as a whole, and (b) there is no direct mention of anything close to annihilation leading to union. The later writer, al-Qushayrī, however, discerns precisely both those points in his reading of the verse:

The servant cannot escape union (*al-jam‘*) and separation (*al-farq*). One who has no separating distinction (*tafriqa*) has no servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*), yet one who has no union has no intimate acquaintance (*ma‘rifā*). His saying, “You we worship,” alludes to separation. His saying, “You we beseech for aid,” alludes to union.<sup>69</sup>

Here, too, there are differences between Anṣārī's structure and al-Qushayrī's.<sup>70</sup> Most important is that al-Qushayrī presents not a progression from separation to union, but rather a constant and necessary tension between the two. Regardless, it becomes difficult to imagine that Ibn Qayyim was unaware of these resonances in the verse he chose for his title. He seems, rather, to have been reappropriating the verse for his reading of the duality of the path in a manner that highlights not annihilation and union as objectives, but obedience and servitude.

Ibn Qayyim's interest lies in reframing the twofold path made famous by Anṣārī through an emphasis on the Sunna and without union as an objective. Such is also the emphasis in his *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn wa-bāb al-sa‘ādatayn* (*The Path of the Two Migrations and the Gate of the Two Forms of Felicity*). There he describes two migrations “at every moment.”<sup>71</sup> One migration is “to God, through seeking and love, servitude, trust, repentance, submission, and entrusting, as well as fear and hope, attentive advancement toward Him, sincere seeking of shelter, and spiritual poverty at every breath.” The other migration is “to His messenger, in his movements and moments of stillness, both outward and inward, with the purpose of aligning oneself with his law (*shar‘*), which delineates that which God loves and brings God satisfaction.” Ibn Qayyim underlines the necessity of seeing the way of ethical advancement in exactly these terms:

68. Sahl b. ‘Abdallāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ‘Uyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1423 AH), 23.

69. Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 136.

70. Anṣārī seems not to have held al-Qushayrī in high regard on account of the latter's efforts to reconcile Sufism and Ash‘arī theology. See Anjum's introduction in Ibn Qayyim, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*, 1:46–7.

71. For this and what follows, see Ibn Qayyim, *Ṭarīq al-hijratayn wa-bāb al-sa‘ādatayn*, ed. Muḥammad Ajmal al-‘Iṣlāḥī (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālim al-Fawā'id, 2008), 8–9.

God will not accept a religion (*dīn*) other than that. Every action outside of God's law merely sustains the lower soul and its claims [to this lower world], without serving as a provision for the next life.<sup>72</sup>

By using the language of a prophetic migration (*hijra*), Ibn Qayyim encapsulates his mission to redeem original forms of piety as found in the Quran and the Sunna. Anṣārī, too, takes great interest in this, beginning every chapter of his *Waystations* with a Quranic quotation, consistently advising adherence to the dicta of the Hadith and warning against rational speculation. Yet Anṣārī also presents the science of Sufism as having an innermost application for elite wayfarers, one that informs the structure of his treatise as it informed many Sufi treatises before his. While Anṣārī interpreted that innermost application as justified by both experience and scripture, viable as a hidden core to be accessed by the elect, Ibn Qayyim's turn away from it is arguably a much larger statement about what qualifies as Islamic.

Ibn Qayyim identifies an excessive unification in al-Tilimsānī's reading of Anṣārī and, in fact, in the entire school of Ibn 'Arabī, which he identifies as the "People of Unification," *al-ittiḥādiyya*. His issue with Anṣārī is that ambiguities in the Ḥanbalī master's text open the door to what he perceives to be a corrupt theology with dangerous implications, as we have seen. Those implications—especially antinomianism and an ontological conflation of God and creation—drive his commentary, which de-emphasizes union and its complementary stations, such as annihilation. His concerns are not new, shared by Sufi writers before him, who were careful to discuss union using allusive or guarded language, such as that of al-Junayd. Those figures, again, such as al-Junayd, presented neither union nor even *wujūd* as ontological matters, but as matters of perception and experience (*dhawq*). Among them was Anṣārī himself. After all, if centering union has dangerous implications, Anṣārī can be implicated in Ibn Qayyim's charge: His path, as has been mentioned, begins with a sense of effort and the cultivation of virtue. The virtuous character traits are placed in the first part of the journey—in the decade of the thirties in the one hundred waystations. As one proceeds on the path, those character traits become negated—rather, transcended—in favor of receiving whatever God decides to give. At the end is union, an imperfect one, but as close to negating selfhood as one can be.

Here, then, al-Tilimsānī's concern with reality becomes useful—the Real, and existence—that is, with the underlying truths that might be said to govern the injunctions and recommendations of scripture. Even if its ontological validity is in question, union might very well have some degree of "psychological validity." All one would need to do is to consider the ethical structure of numerous other philosophies and religions, as well as theories of mystical experience, to appreciate that point. In Neoplatonic ethics, for example, Plotinus (d. 270 CE) divides virtues into two categories: civic virtues and purifications.<sup>73</sup> Civic virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice), as their name suggests, serve a communal role,

72. Ibid.

73. Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 238–9.

maintaining a sense of harmony in society.<sup>74</sup> Purifications (again, wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, but in a different sense) bring a person to disassociate from the body, align the self with the intellect, and ultimately become godlike.<sup>75</sup> Each of the virtues as “purifications” requires a realization that the human reality is something other than what is embodied. This leads to union with the One, or *henōsis*. This can inform our view of annihilation in Sufi ethics, not only because of similarities, but also points of contrast: Nodding to the pivotal place of Islamic law in Anṣārī’s (and Ibn ‘Arabī’s or al-Tilimsānī’s) theory of union, and very much unlike Plotinus, each detailed treatment of Anṣārī’s one hundred waystations begins from within the textual domain of the Quran and, often, the Sunna. Each is put in conversation with nine other waystations, three levels of application, and two major divisions. In both practice and theory, Anṣārī relies on generations of Muslim interpreters, as well as his own experience, to relay this structure. The issue of union, in Anṣārī’s case, is not rational like Plotinus’s, but grounded in the visionary organ of the heart. Nevertheless, when one appreciates the similarities, the ethical pattern, one begins to see that to debate union as a psychological, experiential, or perceptive end might mean grappling with more than Islam, Islamic texts, or Islamic law.

Anṣārī’s structure, with union as a pinnacle of achievement, has analogues in Indian philosophy, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and other traditions as well as in contemporary studies of what is called “religious experience” or “mystical experience.” The keys to understanding this shared phenomenon better, some have argued, might lie in the neurological study of emotions.<sup>76</sup> This is not to say that psychological approaches to religion are completely distinct from the historical.<sup>77</sup> Nor is it to equate *nirvana* with either annihilation (*al-fanā*) or union (*al-jam*), since, for example, differences between Christian, Muslim, and Hindu experiences of union have been considered using statistical analysis.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, union as the pinnacle of an ethically informed mode of self-transformation seems to have special significance for human beings outside of an Islamic context. Indeed, even Ibn Qayyim, as has been mentioned, recognized its power. He acknowledged the legitimacy of both union and annihilation when seen as matters of perception (*shuhūd*), not matters of objective reality or existence (*wujūd*). It is possible that, at the very least from a psychological perspective, if not something much more profound than that, Anṣārī’s structure is neither un-Islamic, nor monistic, but rather extraordinarily human, and it is for this reason that the treatise has captured the imagination of so many—admirers and detractors alike.

74. Plotinus, *Enneads*, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1966–1988), I.2.1, pp. 1:127–9.

75. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.2.1, pp. 1:127–9, as well as I.2.3, p. 1:135.

76. See, for example, Jason N. Blum, “The Science of Consciousness and Mystical Experience: An Argument for Radical Empiricism,” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 1 (March 2014): 150–173. On experience, more broadly, using an approach that brings the study of religion into conversation with psychology and neuroscience, see Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

77. As an example, Adam Afterman has made a case that Philo Judaeus’s (d. 45–50 CE) neoplatonism was the origin of mystical union (or *unio mystica*) in early Jewish thought and practice. See, especially, Afterman’s chapter, “Unio Mystica and Ancient Jewish Mysticism,” in *And They Shall Be One Flesh”: On The Language of Mystical Union in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill), 49–59.

78. Francis-Vincent Anthony, Chris A. M. Hermans, and Carl Sterkens, “A Comparative Study of Mystical Experience Among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 2 (2010): 264–277.

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