

Annihilation in the Messenger Revisited: Clarifications on a Contemporary Sufi Practice and its Precedents

Author(s): Oludamini Ogunnaike

Source: *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 2016), pp. 13-34

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jims.1.2.03>

Accessed: 26-04-2017 17:34 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies*

Annihilation in the Messenger Revisited: Clarifications on a Contemporary Sufi Practice and its Precedents

Oludamini Ogunnaike

Abstract: Most accounts of the Sufi practice of annihilation in the Messenger (*fanā' fi'l-rasūl*) have presented it as a step in the process to annihilation in God (*fanā' fi'llāh*). However, this article will examine contemporary and classical Sufi accounts of annihilation in the Messenger (*fanā' fi'l-rasūl*) that describe this state or station coming after the state of annihilation in God (*fanā' fi'llāh*), constituting the beginning of the station of subsistence (*al-baqā'*). After analyzing these accounts, and the relationship between these two schemas of annihilation (annihilation in the Messenger leads to annihilation in God; annihilation in God is prior to annihilation in the Messenger), this article will conclude with an examination of some of the doctrinal implications of this alternate schema and its significance for debates surrounding the evolution and interpretation of Sufi practice and theory.

*His entrancing state is the union of union,
His heart ravishing beauty the light of light.
He went before and all souls follow after
Grasping the skirts of his garment.*

—Maḥmūd Shabistārī

*The two worlds seek to please God
God seeks to please Muhammad
Muhammad is the door to God
God is the door to Muhammad*

—Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi

Oludamini Ogunnaike is an assistant professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA. His most recent publications include “The Presence of Poetry, the Poetry of Presence: Meditations on Arabic Sufi Poetry Performance and Ritual in Contemporary Dakar,” published in *The Journal of Sufi Studies*, and “An Akbari Approach to the Problem of Pure Consciousness,” forthcoming in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society*.

Sufi veneration of the Prophet Muhammad has long been a subject of great interest to scholars of Islam, producing numerous studies on *mawlid* celebrations on the Prophet's birthday held around the world and throughout the centuries, the practice and popular manuals for invoking prayers upon him, and the numerous works in both poetry and prose describing the virtues and lofty cosmological and metaphysical dimensions of his being.¹ However, the most extreme or intense form of veneration for the Prophet Muhammad, the practice of "annihilation in the Messenger" (*fanā' fi'l-rasūl*), in which the aspirant's consciousness is wholly absorbed in and identified with the spiritual reality of the Prophet, has only begun to receive serious scholarly attention in the past few decades.² Moreover, virtually all serious studies present this practice as a means to attaining eventual annihilation in God (*fanā' fi'llāh*), often as a part of a tripartite schema also involving annihilation in the *shaykh* (*fanā' fi'l-shaykh*). Annemarie Schimmel writes, "the mystic no longer goes straight on his Path toward God: first he has to experience annihilation in the spiritual guide, who functions as the representative of the Prophet, then the... 'annihilation in the Prophet,' before he can hope to reach, if he ever does, *fana fi Allah* [annihilation in God]."³ In his *Introduction to Sufism*, Eric Geoffroy explains, "Before he can abolish his ego in God (*al-fanā' fi Llāh*), the initiate must first extinguish himself in the Messenger, who is the mediating presence, the 'isthmus' between divine and human realities."⁴

In her groundbreaking article on the subject, Valerie Hoffman demonstrates the classical roots of the practice of annihilation in the Messenger (against certain hypotheses identified with theories about "Neo-Sufism" that it was a later innovation meant to replace annihilation in God⁵) in the works of Ibn al-'Arabī and his influential later interpreter 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, writing, "However, we have seen that in the school of Ibn al-'Arabī, *fanā' fi 'l-rasūl* was not a substitute for annihilation in God but a means to it."⁶ While Hoffman's article is primarily concerned with refuting the claims of the Neo-Sufi hypothesis about annihilation in the Messenger, throughout the article she assumes that annihilation in the Messenger is a means, and thus prior, to annihilation in God.

However, as is often the case when it comes to Sufi doctrines, things are not as simple as this scholarly consensus suggests. In this article, I will present some twentieth century writings from the Tijani tradition that describe annihilation in the Messenger as coming *after* annihilation in God, not preceding it. Furthermore, I will argue that this alternative schema is not a recent Tijani innovation, but that many classical texts—including those of Ibn al-'Arabī, al-Jīlī, and al-Dabbāgh cited by Hoffman in her article—actually lend themselves better to this schema than the standard notion that annihilation in the *shaykh* precedes annihilation in the Prophet, which in turn precedes annihilation in God, assumed by the

majority of studies. After analyzing the relationship between the two schemas of annihilation in Sufi literature and practice, I will conclude by examining some of the doctrinal implications of this alternate schema and its significance for debates surrounding Neo-Sufism and the evolution and interpretation of Sufi practice and theory.

Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse

The Senegalese Tijani Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975), founder of the most popular Sufi movement in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Fayḍah Tijāniyyah, described the role of these different kinds of annihilation in the Sufi path in a celebrated sermon given on Shawwāl 1387 AH /January 1968 in Nouakchott, Mauritania:

Shaykh Tijānī says in *Jawāhir al-Maʿānī*, “The reality of oneness (*tawḥīd*) is not perceived, because as long as you continue to speak, you exist and God exists, and so there are two, and then where is the oneness (*tawḥīd*)? There is no oneness (*tawḥīd*) except when it is for God, by God, and to God. The servant has no entrance to this, and no exit from it.” This is only valid for the way of annihilation. For this reason, for the Knowers, their first concern for a seeker is that he finds annihilation in God, then after that he ascends until he arrives at the Shaykh, because he is an attribute of God. The goal of these two annihilations is that the servant will return to this station [annihilation in the attributes], for if he has not met the Messenger of God and the Shaykh [Ahmad Tijani], then he will not know what comes after. So if he continues in this way, he will return to witnessing the existents, [but] he will see the existence as non-existent and existent at the same time. An example of this is what we see in the cinema. Whoever amongst you, of the Knowers, has not seen a movie, I would love for you to see it even once, for you will witness a thing that is non-existent (*mafqūd*) and yet is existent (*mawjūd*). For if it were not existent, you would not see it; but it is in reality, not existent. All existents (everything in existence) are just like a movie.⁷ You witness a thing existing and not existing. And you are like this in your existence: you do good and you know that you are not doing anything, and you avoid bad things and you know that you are not doing anything. God is the one who is the agent.

After that the heart of the seeker proceeds through the unseen, in both waking and dreaming; he witness the unseen in which there is no thing until he is drawn a second time, and he returns to God, he knows with certainty that there is nothing but God, not in a state of annihilation, or drunkenness, or rapture, but while being completely awake. He knows there is nothing but God and he perceives things *as they are*, and he puts every created thing in its place, in which God placed it. And he knows that he is nothing. He exalts things, while not considering them existent; and he fears things, without considering them existent, and he loves things without considering them existent. And he acquires all good actions, he prays, and he fasts, and he makes hajj, and he tells the truth and he spends his money. And all of that is out of good manners (*adab*) to God, while he knows that there is nothing there. And if the servant arrives at this, he is connected to God by a real connection—he doesn’t do anything except for God.⁸

In this sermon, Shaykh Ibrahim presents the Shaykh (presumably Shaykh Ahmad Tijani) and the Messenger as “attributes” of God and annihilation in them as occurring *after* annihilation in God. These annihilations in the Messenger and the Shaykh allow the disciple to continue on to “what comes after,” the station of *baqā’* (subsistence) described in the second paragraph.⁹

Elsewhere, Shaykh Ibrahim describes his own experience of annihilation in these realities in the following way:

A momentous occurrence happened to the humble servant writing this in the year 1350 after the Hijrah of Muḥammad, upon him be blessings and peace. It was this: I came to abide for a hundred thousand years among the days of the Lord. There I heard the purest, pre-eternal speech in intimate conversation. I became bewildered and restless, as both rapture and longing were joined in me.

Then I plunged headlong into the Divine Presence, and I witnessed there the reality of the reality of the reality, in utter essentiality, exclusivity, and blinding effacement. Nothing was left of sensory feelings. I dwelled like this for two thousand years.

Then something was with me. Existence emerged from me like shadows or smoke. And I sought after this existence, and then I was with the Messenger of the Divine Essence, the servant of the Divine Essence and Its secret. And he came close to me and stayed suspended until I disappeared in him. He became my essence. Then I was overcome with joy, for I was the beloved of the Divine Essence, Its secret, Its desire. I was he who held Its comprehensive station, to whom the perfection of the Divine Essence was manifest. I resided in my state of rapture for one million years.

In this manifestation in the unseen, I did not find any servant of the Divine Essence except myself. But then there was another manifestation, in the unseen of the unseen, and I saw the Divine Majesty in the Divine Beauty. In this presence of the unseen of the unseen, I was called and named, “O Aḥmad al-Tijānī!” I knew for certain that the Real had no desire for anything, after the secret, except for me. I kept company with this servant of the Divine Essence, and I helped him and aided him for two million years.

Then God made me the father of humanity, and the spiritual support for the entirety of existent beings, the Adam of souls and spirits. I carried the trust (*amānah*), and I was addressed with, “O *Dāwūd*, surely we have made you the vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on the earth” (38:26). I looked at the earth, and saw its state, the worlds of sense and of meaning, and then the celestial gathering. “We built the heaven with might, and We it is who made the vast expanse. And we have laid out the earth. Gracious is He who spread it out! And all things We have created in pairs, that haply you may reflect. Therefore flee to Allah, I am a warner to you from Him. Set up no other gods besides God. I am a warner to you from Him (51:41–51). So I came back to my sensory feeling, and it was as if the time period of its occurrence was [no more than the distance between] the even and the odd. Glory be to God the Majestic. He selects whom He will for what He wills, and no one outstrips His wisdom. “And He is not asked about what He does, but they are the ones asked.” (21:23)¹⁰

In this account, as in the Mauritanian sermon, annihilation in the Divine Essence precedes annihilation in the Messenger and annihilation in the Shaykh. However, this schema appears neither to be unique to the Tijani tradition nor to contemporary Sufi doctrine, as can be clearly seen by revisiting the examples cited by Hoffman in her article. Furthermore, revisiting these examples will give us a better sense of the epistemological significance of the practice of *fanā' fī rasūl*.

Ibn al-'Arabī

In the article cited above, Valerie Hoffman tells a story that Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240 CE) relates about the early Sufi Abū Yazīd Bistāmī (d. ca. 848 CE), which, incidentally, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse also cites in his most popular work, *The Removal of Confusion*:

Abū Yazīd was among those reported as saying things like this [*I am God* (27:9), and *Verily, I am God, there is no god but Me* (20:14), and *There is no god but I, so worship Me* (27:14)] in a state of full sobriety and establishment; knowing that the Real is the One manifesting in the servant's actions within the substance of potentialities. So in some of his states, he spoke as He, and in some states, he did not mention that he was speaking as He.

Some of the gnostics said in regard to the disciple (of Abū Yazīd) who considered Allah sufficient for him in his claim (to have witnessed Him), thereby disregarding seeing Abū Yazīd, that seeing Abū Yazīd one time is better than seeing Allāh a thousand times. (After the disciple was informed of this) Abū Yazīd passed in front of him, and he was told "that is Abū Yazīd." When his eyes fell on the Shaykh, the disciple died. When Abū Yazīd was informed of his death, he said, "He saw what he could not bear, for Allah manifested Himself to him in me. He could not bear it, just as Moses could not bear it (when Allah manifested Himself to him on the mountain). Allah's manifestation in me was greater than the divine manifestation the disciple used to witness in himself."¹¹

Ibn al-'Arabī concludes, "Since the matter is thus, we know that our vision of the Real in the Muḥammadan form by the Muḥammadan vision is the most perfect vision [of God] that there is. So we do not cease to encourage people to [seek] this."¹² While it is not necessarily the case that the disciple's "seeing God" and "the divine manifestation he used to witness in himself" are precisely coextensive with annihilation in God, the same principle applies. An adept's experience of the Real in the state of annihilation in the Real is not as complete as her experience of the Real in the state of annihilation in the Messenger; just as in the hours before the dawn the moon is brighter than the faint glow of sunrise on the horizon. In another passage (which Hoffman also partially cites), Ibn al-'Arabī explains this point in greater detail, employing the analogy of the mirror:

Know that mirrors are diverse in shape and that they modify the object seen by the observer according to their own shapes, whether they be tall, wide, curved, bent, round,

small, large, numerous, and so on—whatever may be given by the shape of the mirror. It is known that the messengers are the most balanced of all people in their constitution, since they receive messages from their Lord. Each of them receives the message to the measure of the composition God has given him in his constitution. There is no prophet who was not sent specifically to a designated people, since he possessed a specific and curtailed constitution. But God sent Muḥammad with an all-inclusive message for all people without exception. He was able to receive such a message because he possessed an all-inclusive constitution which comprises the constitution of every prophet and messenger, since he has the most balanced and most perfect of constitutions....

Once you come to know this, and once you desire to see the Real in the most perfect manner in which He can become manifest in this human plane, then you need to know that this does not belong to you. You do not have a constitution like that possessed by Muḥammad. Whenever the Real discloses Himself to you within the mirror of your heart, your mirror will make him manifest to you in the measure of its constitution and in the form of its shape. You know how far you stand below Muḥammad's degree in knowledge of his Lord through his plane. So cling to faith and follow him! Place him before you as the mirror within which you gaze upon your own form and the form of others. When you do this, you will come to know that God must disclose himself to Muḥammad within his mirror. I have already told you that a mirror displays an effect in that which is seen from the point of view of the observer who sees. So the manifestation of the Real within the mirror of Muḥammad is the most perfect, most balanced, and most beautiful manifestation, because of the mirror's actuality. When you perceive Him in the mirror of Muḥammad, you will have perceived from Him a perfection which you could not perceive in respect of considering your own mirror.¹³

Do not try then to contemplate God elsewhere than in the mirror of the Prophet, on whom be blessing and peace; be wary of contemplating Him in your own mirror or contemplating the Prophet and what manifests itself in his mirror, in your own mirror. [...] Persist then in following him and imitating him and do not walk in any place where you do not see the trace of your Prophet, and place your foot in the imprint of his, if you want to be of those who have attained to the supreme degrees and sublime contemplation.¹⁴

Thus, given the imperfection of one's mirror in comparison to the Prophet's, Ibn al-'Arabī concludes that for the Sufi aspirant, the Real's manifestation in the Prophet will be more "perfect and balanced" than its manifestation in one's own mirror. It is as if one were in an alley whose tall buildings block the direct sight of the sun. One can perceive the sunlight in the sky, but if one were to look at a mirror that does have a direct line of sight to the sun, one would be dazzled by its brilliance.

Furthermore, Ibn al-'Arabī describes the "mirror of Muḥammad" as not only providing more perfect knowledge of the Real in its Essence, but also of ourselves and other creatures since due to the perfect composition of this "mirror," it gives us a more complete picture of ourselves and other things than we could obtain without it. However, one could just as well ask if the same distorting effect that mirrors have on the image of the Real could also apply to the Prophet? Can

our mirrors ever contain what is beyond their capacity to contain? If our own vision or knowledge of the Real is incomplete or weak when compared to our knowledge or vision of the Real through the mirror of the Prophet, what of our knowledge or vision of this Prophetic mirror? Is this not just shifting the goalposts?

The later Sufi tradition, including the Tijānī tradition, introduces the intermediary of the *shaykh* (i.e. by one's Shaykh, one knows the Prophet, by the Prophet, one knows God).¹⁵ However, this can still be regarded as just another shifting of the goalposts, for if the mirror is still bent or imperfect, how can it not distort all that appears within?

Within Ibn al-'Arabi's works, the answer to this question can be found in his concept of "gods created in belief," to which the metaphor of imperfect mirrors alludes, and in his concept of "following Muḥammad" (alluded to in the final paragraph of the above quotation), in which the spiritual practice of following the Prophet's example "polishes" and perfects mirrors so that they begin to approximate that of the Prophet. As discussed above, Ibn al-'Arabi argues that our particular constitutions, the limitations which make us individuals, "color" and "shape" our belief and knowledge of God, just as the form of a mirror shapes the images that appear within it, or a cup colors the water poured into it. Because of this, most people simply end up worshipping a "god created in belief," a constructed idea of God, bound by one's own particular limitations.

Ibn al-'Arabi bases many of his discussions of this topic on the verse of the Qur'an which states, *They did not measure God in accordance with the reality of His measure (ḥaqq^a qadrihi)... on the Day of Resurrection*¹⁶ (39:67) and the related "Hadith of Transformations" in which God appears to people on the Day of Resurrection in a form in which they do not recognize Him, declaring, "I am your Lord." The people reject Him in this form and say, "No! We take refuge in God from you!" Then God appears to them in a familiar form, again declaring "I am your Lord."¹⁷ This time, people recognize and accept Him in this familiar form, saying "You are our Lord." Ibn al-'Arabi argues that these accounts not only refer to the Day of Resurrection, but also that they describe what is happening right now in regard to all of the self-manifestations (*tajalliyāt*) in which God presents Himself to us. He writes,

Generally speaking, each person necessarily sticks to a particular belief concerning his Lord. He always goes back to His Lord through his particular belief and seeks God therein. Such a man positively recognizes God only when He manifests himself to him in the form recognized by his belief. But when He manifests himself in other beliefs, he flatly refuses to accept Him and runs away from Him. In so doing, he simply behaves in an improper way towards God, while imagining that he is practicing good manners (*adab*) towards Him. Thus a person who clings to belief believes in a god according to what he has made in his own soul/mind (*nafs*). The god of beliefs comes about through

the subjective act of making/positing (*ja'1*) on the part of the believers. They see naught but their own souls and what they have made therein.

So contemplate the fact that the hierarchy of mankind in their knowledge of God is their very hierarchy in terms of their vision on the Day of Resurrection. So beware of being bound by a particular belief and rejecting all others as unbelief! If you do that, much good will escape you. Nay, you will fail to obtain the true knowledge of reality. Try to make yourself a (kind of) Prime Matter (*hyle*) for all forms of belief, for God is too vast and too great to be confined to one belief to the exclusion of another. For He says, *Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God* (2:115). God does not specify (in this verse) a particular place in which the Face of God is to be found, He only said, *there is the Face of God*. The “face” of a thing means its real essence. With this verse, God admonished the hearts of the Knowers so that they might not be distracted by nonessential matters in this lower world from being constantly aware of this kind of thing. For no one knows at which moment he will be taken [die]. If one is taken during a moment of forgetfulness, his position will certainly not be equal to another who dies in a state of clear awareness.¹⁸

Thus, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the degree of one’s knowledge of God is directly related to the degree to which one can recognize the Real in all of its various forms. That is, the degree to which one can transcend or go beyond one’s own subjective conception of reality, one’s “god created in belief.” This can only be achieved through following one who has already transcended these limitations, and worshipping his absolutely unconditioned object of worship. For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the Prophet Muḥammad is the example *par excellence* of one who has an infinitely receptive heart which recognizes God in all of His manifestations, and so one hoping for “knowledge of things as they are” must follow his example. Otherwise, one merely worships a creation of one’s own imagination. As he concludes,

When a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through consideration. Hence he worships only a god which he has created through his consideration.... That is why God has commanded us to worship the God brought by the Messenger and spoken of in the Book. For if you worship this God, you will be worshipping that which you have not created. On the contrary, you will be worshipping your Creator, and you will have fully given worship its due (*haqq*). For knowledge of God only derives from following. It cannot possibly be derived from proofs.¹⁹

The real knower of God, the “Muḥammadan,” is he who has escaped his own limitations through his heart’s ability to take on every form. In the example of the cup and water mentioned above, the only way for the cup (the heart) to display the true color of water is for it to become transparent—that is, to transcend its coloring and become capable of taking on any color. This transformation is achieved by transcending one’s own “gods created in belief;” that is, by following the Messenger of God to the point that one becomes identified with his state of perfect receptivity, achieving annihilation in him. It is only after having achieved this state of perfect receptivity to all of the Divine Self-disclosures

that one can know and recognize God in His Essence as well as in all of His various manifestations. Thus, annihilation in the Messenger is necessary for the perfection of Knowledge and recognition of God not just in Himself (*al-Ḥaqq*), but also in His creation (*al-khalq*).

This last point suggests a connection between *fanā' fi'l-rasūl* and *baqā'*, the station often described in Sufi texts as the annihilation of annihilation (*fanā' al-fanā'*). If one sees created things but not God in the everyday state of affairs, in *fanā'* one sees only God and not created things. However, the station of *baqā'* combines these two states, such that one sees created things in God and God in created things.

This connection is made explicit in the following passage from Ibn al-'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (*The Meccan Openings/Revelations*), in which he likens the spiritual path to a ladder:

However, all the steps of the meanings for the prophets, the friends, the faithful, and the messengers are the same. No ladder has a single step more than any other. The first step is Islam, which is submission (*inqiyād*). The last step is annihilation (*fanā'*) in going up (*'urūj*) and subsistence (*baqā'*) in coming out (*khurūj*). Between the two steps are the other steps: faith, virtue knowledge, declaring holy, declaring incomparable, independence, poverty, abasement, exaltation, variegation, and stability in variegation. Then comes annihilation if you are leaving [the ladder], or subsistence if you are entering it [from the top].²⁰

The Muḥammadan station of “stability in variegation,” (the capacity to take on all forms as described above) as the last rung of the ladder, is the nexus or *barzakh* between the One and the many, God and the world, the Real and its manifestations, and it is the key to understanding their interrelationship: presence of the many in the One and the One in the many.

Thus, according to Ibn al-'Arabī, *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*, coming back down from annihilation in the Divine Essence, permits aspirants to further transcend their individual limitations and begin the stage of subsistence, of complete *ma'rīfah* (spiritual knowledge/ recognition), in which they can recognize God in themselves, in His Essence, and in all of His manifestations.

'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī

As with much else in Ibn al-'Arabī's work, the concepts of *fanā' fi'l-rasūl* and the “mirror of Muḥammad” find precedent in the oeuvre of the twelfth-century Persian Sufi theorist 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d. 1131 CE). In his *Tamḥīdāt* (*Preparatory Remarks*), he writes:

All of the wayfarers to God have found success: they have gone to God from themselves. But Muhammad came to the creatures from God (T 301, § 395).

Alas! Listen to these words: the end and conjunction of all of the wayfarers is with the light of Muṣṭafā [the Prophet Muḥammad]. However, I do not know with whom

Muṣṭafā's end and conjunction will be! "He who sees me has seen the Real." The explanation of this statement has been done (T 303, § 398).

"Glory to the one who has not given creatures a path to knowing Him except through the inability to know Him!" Whoever has not been given a path to knowing His non-delimited (*bī chūn*) Essence, rather whoever searches for the path to the knowledge of His Essence, a mirror is set up for the soul of his own reality, and he looks in that mirror—he knows the spirit of Muhammad. Thus, the mirror is set up for the spirit of Muhammad. The sign of this mirror has come: "I saw my Lord on the night of the Ascension in the most beautiful form." In this mirror, *Faces that Day shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord* (Q 75:22–23) will be found, and a cry will be given in the world: *They did not measure God with His true measure* (Q 6:91, 22:74, 39:67); that is, "They did not know God with His true knowledge." This station is exalted and rare. Here, nobody reaches, and nobody knows. (T 58–59, § 79)

When man reaches this station—namely that he becomes intoxicated from the wine of knowledge—when he reaches the perfection of intoxication and the end of his own finality, the spirit of Muhammad—*A messenger has indeed come unto you from yourselves* (Q 9:128)—is displayed to him. "Blessed be the one who sees me and believes in me." The robe of his days is prepared. He finds a wealth beyond which there is no other wealth. Whoever knows his own self, knows the spirit of Muhammad.... When he acquires knowledge of the light of Muhammad and the allegiance of *Truly those who pledge allegiance unto thee pledge allegiance only unto God* (Q 48:10) is bound, the wayfarer's work in this world and the next world is complete: *This day I have perfected for you your religion* (Q 5:3) (T 56–58, § 77)²¹

In these passages, as in those of Ibn al-'Arabī, the Prophet is described as a kind of mirror which marks the end of the spiritual path and allows for the perfection of the knowledge of God and the aspirant's own self. In the first quotation, as in both Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse's and Ibn al-'Arabī's accounts, this "Muḥammadan" station is linked to that of *baqā'* in that it is described as coming "to the creatures from God."

'Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh

The same themes also appear in the celebrated "Prayer of Ibn Mashīsh" (*al-Ṣalāt al-Mashīshīyyah*) of Ibn al-'Arabī's near-contemporary and master of the founder of the Shadhīlī *ṭarīqah* (Sufi order), 'Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh (d. 1228 CE). In this oft-cited and commented-upon prayer,²² Ibn Mashīsh directly refers to *fanā' fi'l-llāh* and *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*:

O my God, he is Thine integral secret that demonstrateth (*sic.*) Thee, and Thy supreme veil, raised up before Thee.

...

Plunge me in the oceans of Oneness (*al-aḥādīyah*), pull me back from the sloughs of *tawḥīd*.

And drown me in the essence (or the source) (*ʿayn*) of the ocean of Unity (*al-waḥdah*), so that I neither see nor hear nor am conscious nor feel except through it.

And make of the Supreme Veil the life of my spirit, and [make] his spirit the secret of my reality, and [make] his reality all my worlds, by the realization of the First Truth.²³

Recalling that the Prophet is described as “The Supreme Veil” in the first sentence of this prayer, the last sentence is clearly an invocation of *fanāʾ fi-l-rasūl*,²⁴ while the previous two invocations (“Plunge me in the oceans of Oneness...” and “Drown me essence of the ocean of Unity...”) refer to *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*, respectively.²⁵ Titus Burckhardt, the translator of this passage, explains, “In Oneness in the sense of *al-aḥadiyyah*, all traces of the creature or the servant are effaced, whereas in Unity in the sense of *al-waḥdah*, the creature appears in God, multiplicity in unity and unity in multiplicity. The first state thus corresponds to extinction (*fanāʾ*) and the second to subsistence (*baqāʾ*) in God.”²⁶ It is significant that just as the invocation of *baqāʾ* comes after that of *fanāʾ*, the invocation of *fanāʾ fi-l-rasūl* comes after both. Although subtle, this is another clear allusion to a perspective in which annihilation in the Messenger is linked with subsistence and depicted as coming after annihilation in God.

‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī

Further allusions to this schema can be found in the works of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1424 CE), one of the most influential and creative interpreters of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Sufi theology. In his treatise, *Qāb al-Qawsayn wa multaḳā al-nāmūsayn*, “The Two Bows’ Length,”²⁷ al-Jīlī writes,

Know that the perfect saint, whenever he increases his knowledge (*maʿrifah*) of God, he calms and establishes his being in his remembrance (*dhikr*) of He who does not forget him [God]. But, whenever he increases his knowledge of the prophet, he becomes agitated and the traces of this agitation appear on him in his remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Prophet. That is because the saint’s knowledge of God is in accordance with the measure (*qadr*) of the receptivity of the saint, while his agitation in God and the knowledge of the Prophet is because he drinks from the knowledge of God in accordance with the measure of the receptivity of the Prophet. So for this reason, he cannot endure being established in it and the signs [of agitation] appear on him because it is beyond his limits. The more the saint increases in knowledge of the Prophet, the more perfect than the others and more firmly established in the Divine Presence is he, and he enters into the knowledge of God absolutely.²⁸

Here, as in the story of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, the remembrance and knowledge of the Prophet overwhelms the saint because it takes him beyond the limited measure (*qadr*) of his own capacity to know God.²⁹ Elsewhere, al-Jīlī boldly states, “The knowledge that the Prophet has of God is the same knowledge that God has of Himself.”³⁰ This explains the last sentence of the passage quoted

above, and the epistemological importance of *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*, which al-Jīlī movingly describes in another passage from *Qāb al-Qawsayn*:

It is not only about access to the supreme happiness through his intervention, [...] it is necessary that you attach yourself to his sublime presence and that you cling to the “strong bond” (Q. 2:256, 31:22), by virtue of his unsurpassed dignity and, in that, never ceasing to have present in the spirit this perfect form which embraces all realities and forms of existence, until the secrets pour forth into your spirit, and your spirit on your heart, and your heart on your soul; and your soul on your body pours the beverage of his love, a drink so subtle which will revivify the spirit and body, and annihilate the contours of your individuality *to the point that you depart and that he, upon him be peace and mercy, be in you in place of yourself* (*fatadhabūna wa yakūnu fikum 'iwādan minkum 'ankum*).³¹

Here we have not only strong echoes of the prayer of Ibn Mashīsh, but also of Ibn al-'Arabī's description of the Prophet as the “perfect form which embraces all realities and forms of existence.” From these passages, it appears that for Jīlī, perpetual presence with and annihilation in the Prophet is a station beyond annihilation in God, and is the “supreme happiness” and utmost knowledge of the Divine which the aspirant can hope to attain because it is identical with God's knowledge of Himself.

Ibn 'Ajībah / Abū'l 'Abbās al-Mursī

In a section of his *al-Futūḥāt al-Ilāhiyyah* (*Divine Openings/Revelations*) devoted to prayers on the Prophet, the influential Shādhilī-Darqawī author Muḥammad ibn 'Ajībah (d. 1808 CE) seems to share this perspective, describing the highest category of those who invoke blessings on the Prophet,

Then there are those who invoke blessings upon his [the Prophet's] primordial light, which is the light of all lights. They are the people of firmness and mastery among the people of direct witnessing and vision. The Prophet never leaves them for the blink of an eye, which is why Shaykh Abu al-Abbās [al-Mursī (d. 1287 CE)],³² said: ‘Were the Messenger of God to leave me for the blink of an eye, I would not count myself among the Muslims,’ alluding to his own firmness and mastery in the Presence, and *his having come back to the station of subsistence* (al-baqā') *by direct witnessing of the Intermediary* (the Prophet). Such people's thoughts roam through the World of Dominion (al-Malakūt), and their spirits are connected to the World of Domination (al-Jabarūt), and in them is combined all that is lacking in others, as the Prophet said: ‘All prey is in the belly of the wild donkey’; for the wild donkey is the fattest of all hunted animals, so that whoever catches it, it is as if he had caught all prey. And as the poet said:

“It is not beyond God in the least, To combine all worlds in one man.”³³

Here we have a direct and explicit account of *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*, connecting it to *baqā'* after *fanā' fi'llāh*. The passage even suggests that this lofty station of

spiritual perfection beyond annihilation is attained through “direct witnessing” of the Prophet, and the saint’s constant presence with him.

‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh

A few generations before Ibn ‘Ajībah, the remarkable unschooled mystic of Fez, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh, whose teachings (as recorded by his disciple Aḥmad ibn Mubārak al-Lamaṭī [d. 1742 CE]) were to become influential in eighteenth to twentieth-century Sufi movements, described the vision of and annihilation in the Prophet in a similar manner.

Al-Dabbāgh recounts that he spent years moving from one *shaykh* to another in search of spiritual illumination without success. Then one night, after his usual Thursday night practice of reciting the entire *Burdah* of al-Buṣīrī (d. 1294 CE) (perhaps the most famous poem in praise of the Prophet) at the tomb of Sidi ‘Alī ibn Ḥarāzīm, he met a man who told him things about himself that only a saint could know. So al-Dabbāgh asked the stranger to give him a litany (*wird*) and invocation (*dhikr*) to practice. After several refusals meant to test the supplicant’s sincerity, the stranger agreed to al-Dabbāgh’s request and told him, “Say seven thousand times every day: ‘Oh Lord God, for the sake of the rank of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh—God’s blessing and peace be upon him—bring me and my lord Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh together in this world before the hereafter.’”³⁴ Then the stranger commended al-Dabbāgh to the care of the man who was to become his *shaykh*. Shortly before his death, this *shaykh* of al-Dabbāgh told him that the stranger who had given him this invocation was none other than al-Khiḍr.

Al-Dabbāgh recounts that he persisted in this invocation until he had an incredibly powerful experience of spiritual illumination (*fath*) shortly after his *shaykh*’s death. He recalls that he felt as if he perceived the entire cosmos at once, his body became “all eyes,” and “a great light like sudden lightning came from every direction.”³⁵ The next day, he was met by a certain ‘Abd Allāh al-Barnāwī (from Borno, in present-day Northeastern Nigeria) who had been sent to guide him until, in Dabbāgh’s own words:

I beheld the lord of creation [the Prophet]-God’s blessings and peace be upon him! Sidi ‘Abd Allāh al-Barnāwī said: “Oh Sayyidi ‘Abd al-‘Aziz [al-Dabbāgh], before today I was afraid for your sake. But today since God the Sublime, through His mercy, has united you with the lord of creation-God’s blessings and peace be upon him-my heart feels safe and my mind is assured. I therefore leave you in the hands of God-He is mighty and glorious!” He then returned to his own country and left me. The reason for his staying with me was to protect me from darkness entering into me during the illumination I experienced. This was until I should experience the illumination of beholding the Prophet-God’s blessings and peace be upon him-because then there’s no cause for fear concerning an enlightened person (*maftūh*), but before that there is cause for fear.³⁶

Later in the same work, al-Dabbāgh defines the direct vision (*mushāhadah*) of the Prophet as “the second *fath* (illumination), which divides the people of truth from the people of vanity. As for the first *fath* (illumination), that is like what happens to the people of darkness who witness ephemeral things and gain mastery over them. You will see a person engaged in such vanities walking on water or flying through the sky or bringing food from an unknown source, though he doesn’t even believe in God.”³⁷

While one cannot precisely equate the technical terms “illumination” (*fath*) and “annihilation” (*fanā’*), as in the previous accounts, al-Dabbāgh’s account presents the encounter with the Prophet as a second illumination that perfects the first. Equally interesting is the role that prayers and praise of the Prophet played at each step in his spiritual journey. He began with the recitation of the *Burdah*, then continued to practice the *taṣliyah* (prayer on the Prophet) given to him by Khidr until his prayers were answered and he was joined with the Prophet.

Elsewhere in the same work, al-Dabbāgh alludes to the epistemic significance of the mystical encounter with the Prophet:

And among the people of unveiling (*kashf*) is one of the secrets of God the Sublime, namely knowledge of the truth as it really is. In the Prophet, God’s blessings and peace be upon him, it’s advanced to a level whose high degree is unattainable.³⁸

Since his vision-God’s blessings and peace be upon him-can’t be supported by anyone, Ibn Mashish sought to be joined to it without having achieved it because he was unable to achieve it. He said-God be pleased with him: “But be on guard not to think that the shaykh’s free-ranging vision, his concentrated striving, and his absolute resolve were directed toward anything other than the Prophet’s noble person (*dhāt*)-God’s blessings and peace be upon him-as for instance unveiling (*kashf*), the power of free disposal (*taṣarruf*) and Friendship with God. For these [drives] were exclusively focused on the Prophet’s person.”³⁹

As in al-Jīlī’s and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s accounts, here the Prophet is described as possessing the most complete vision of reality “as it is”—a degree which none but he can attain. For this reason, Ibn Mashish’s prayer requests union with the Prophet, and for this same reason the great *shaykhs* focus all of their attention and resolve on the Prophet in order to obtain unveiling (*kashf*).

Other Schema

From the accounts above, we can clearly see that as far back as ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī in the twelfth century and Ibn al-‘Arabī in the thirteenth century, annihilation in the Messenger was conceived, experienced and described as coming *after* annihilation in God, and was often associated with the station of *baqā’* and going beyond the aspirant’s individual capacity for vision and knowledge of God. However, this in no way invalidates the other schema of

annihilation in the *shaykh*, which leads to annihilation in the Messenger and annihilation in God. In fact, this schema seems to be even more common in Sufi literature, and most of the authors cited above also describe the various kinds of annihilation in this manner. For example, in *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* (*The Pure Gold*), al-Dabbāgh is recorded as having said:

Let no one hope for knowledge of God without knowing the Apostle-God's blessings and peace be upon him! And let no one hope for knowledge of the Apostle-God's blessings and peace be upon him-without knowing his *shaykh*. And let no one hope for knowledge of his *shaykh* without having recited the prayers for the dead over the people.⁴⁰

Likewise, Bernd Radtke and R. S. O'Fahey's work has demonstrated that Aḥmad ibn Idrīs (d. 1837 CE) and his disciples Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Sanūsī (d. 1859 CE) and Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mirghānī (d. 1853 CE) prescribed for their disciples a three-step process of annihilation in the *shaykh*, then the Prophet, and then God.⁴¹ Similarly, Ibn 'Atā'illāh, the successor of Abū'l-'Abbās al-Mursī (and thus part of the spiritual lineage of 'Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh and the spiritual ancestor of Ibn 'Ajībah) explains the reason for this more common schema in his *Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ* (*The Key to Salvation*):

In the initiatic journey, there are diverse paths; you will not see any deviation or crookedness in a single one of them. I will begin now with an Invocation of this way, which goes back to the Imām Abu Bakr as-Siddīq. I learned it from one of the realized sages. This way consists in the seeker's beginning by praying upon the Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace!) without any other type of invocation. For he (may God bless him and grant him peace!) is the intermediary between God and us, our guide to Him and our means of knowing him through gnosis. Attachment to the Intermediary precedes attachment to the One Who sent him....

Perhaps the secret of the religious prescription of prayers upon the Prophet is that the spirit of man is weak and unprepared to receive divine lights. So when the connection between his spirit and the Spirit of the Prophets becomes deep-rooted through prayers upon them, then the lights flowing forth from the Invisible World upon the Spirit of the Prophets will reflect upon the spirit of those praying upon them.⁴²

Hinting at the relationship between the two schemas of annihilation, 'Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadānī describes "two stations" that lie at the end of the path: this first is seeing God in the light of the Messenger, and the second is seeing the Messenger in the light of God.

There are two stations for the wayfarer at the end of the path. The first station is that the light of "no god but God" is seen in the veil of the light of Muhammad the Messenger of God just as the shining moon stands in the midst of the sun. The second station is that the light of Muhammad is seen in the light of God, like the light of the stars in the light of the shining moon. (T 77, § 108)

The perfection of aspiration is that one sees the light of “No god but God” better in the veil of “Muhammad is the Messenger of God”—one cannot see without a veil for his vision is still raw, until it ripens. When it ripens, will “Muhammad is the Messenger of God” be lifted from in-between? No, never! This is an erroneous conjecture! Rather, its subjugation under the severity of “No god but God” will appear. It is this way for the one at the end (*muntahī*). We have spoken to the beginner (*muḥtadī*) like this, namely that the beauty of “No god but God” can only be seen in the veil of “Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” (NI 280, § 466)⁴³

Finally, Shaykh Ibrahim Niassé’s popular treatise, “The Three Stages of Religion,” provides an explanation of the stages of the spiritual path based on the Hadith of Gabriel and the presences (*ḥaḍarāt*) of the *shaykh*, Prophet, and God:

These are the nine stages of religion, and if you meditate upon them you will find the essence of the stations in the realities, and that they correspond to the nine Presences (*Ḥaḍarāt*), and they are the same. For if you enter the Divine pre-Eternal Presence (*Ḥaḍarāt Azaliyah*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Muḥammadan Presence (*Ḥaḍarāt Muḥammadiyyah*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī]; and if you arrive at the Aḥmadi Presence (*Ḥaḍarāt Aḥmadiyah*), you fulfill your desire for God, for the Messenger of God, and for the Shaykh [al-Tijānī], and so the Presences are nine: three within three, just as the stages [of religion] are nine: three within three. The presence of the shaykh is the station of *Islām* (Submission), the presence of the Messenger is the station of *Imān* (Belief), and the Presence of God is the station of *Ihsān* (Excellence), *And verily unto your Lord is the final end.* (53:42)⁴⁴

Here Shaykh Ibrahim appears to describe entering the presences of the *shaykh*, Prophet, and God in the standard ascending order, equating them with the three ascending levels or dimensions (*Islām*, *Imān*, *Ihsān*) of al-Bukharī’s narration of the Hadith of Gabriel.

The Relationship between the Two Schemas

So what is the relationship between these two schemas? Do they contradict one another? Do they represent different schools of thought or perspectives? ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s notion of the “two stations” provides one explanation of this relationship which is notably similar to that implicit in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s analogy of the ladder, in which “the last step is annihilation in going up and subsistence in coming out ... annihilation if you are leaving [the ladder], or subsistence if you are entering it [from the top].”⁴⁵ That is, there are two annihilations in the Messenger: one “going up,” which leads to annihilation in God, and one “coming down,” which is a part of subsistence in the divine presence. However, from this perspective, “going down” should not be understood as moving away from God or as descending to lesser spiritual station; on the contrary, it is going “deeper” into the Real, which is beyond any notion of near or far.

Ibn al-'Arabī makes this explicit, commenting on the verses, *He drew nigh and came down [or drew nearer],⁴⁶ till he was two bows' length or nearer (53:8–9)*, which describe the zenith of the Prophet's *mi'rāj* (heavenly ascent), "There is no drawing close, no coming down, no ascending and no falling, If you consider all these through realization, they are only lines.... The coming down is to Him, and the drawing close is toward Him."⁴⁷

In the same vein, Ibn al-'Arabī and his school (like other Sufis) take the Prophet's *mi'rāj* as a model for the spiritual path⁴⁸ and describe three or four "journeys" or stages corresponding to the Prophet's heavenly ascent and descent: the journey from creation (*al-khalq*) to the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*), the journey in the Real, and the journey from the Real to creation with/by the Real.⁴⁹ This last journey is identified with subsistence after annihilation (also called "separation after union," *al-farq ba'd al-jam'*). All of these stages or journeys are conceived of and described as following in the footsteps of the Prophet.

Thus, we can see how the standard schema of annihilation in the *shaykh* leading to annihilation in the Messenger, leading to annihilation in God, refers to the first stage of spiritual ascent ("going up" Ibn al-'Arabī's ladder), while the second schema explored in this article, in which annihilation in the Messenger comes after and goes beyond the individual aspirant's annihilation in God, refers to a second stage of spiritual descent ("going down" Ibn al-'Arabī's ladder). In no way should this second schema be interpreted as placing the Prophet above or beyond God, since from this perspective, the whole journey takes place in God anyway, and the "return" takes one "deeper" into the Real in the footsteps of the Messenger.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have tried to demonstrate in this article the existence in Sufi literature of two distinct schemas for describing annihilation in the Messenger (*fanā' fi'l-rasūl*). The first schema describes annihilation in the Messenger as a precursor or means to annihilation in God (*fanā' fi'l-llāh*), whereas the second schema describes annihilation in the Messenger as coming after and perfecting annihilation in God. In the first schema, the Prophet can be compared to a solar filter that allows one to look at the sun, while in the second schema, he is like a mirror or a lens, which makes the sun even more blinding than when viewed with the naked eye.⁵⁰

The present study also demonstrates the existence of both schemas not only in the works of the so-called "Neo-Sufi" African orders of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (the Sanūsiyyah, Mirghaniyyah/Khātimiyyah and other Idrīsī traditions, as well as the Tijāniyyah), but also in the works of diverse figures going as far back as 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī in the twelfth century and Ibn al-'Arabī in the thirteenth century. This study also shows that the notion of

“annihilation the Prophet” was central to the prayer of Ibn Mashīsh, which was ubiquitous in Shādhilī and other North African Sufi circles from the thirteenth century onwards. This evidence suggests that the centrality of the figure of the Prophet and the notion of annihilation in the Prophet, far from being a “Neo-Sufi” innovation, has been an integral part of Sufi doctrine and practice since its inception. As Claude Addas writes, concluding her study on al-Jilī’s *Qāb al-Qawsayn*:

An investigation of the *Qāb qawsayn* clearly establishes that the prophetocentrism (*sic.*) which characterised the doctrinal and initiatic teaching of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African masters, does not in any way constitute a new phenomenon arising from nowhere. We should not see Jilī as the founding father of the Muhammadan Way. This would be to forget that in every era and from the first days of Islam the quest for God has merged with *ittibā’ al-nabī* [following the Prophet] in the proper sense of the term, which implies following patiently and step-by-step, the itinerary traced by God’s Elect.... And even if the practice of attachment to the Prophet does not appear to be set out in texts from the seventh-century Hijra, in my opinion there is hardly any doubt that it always had currency with those who, from one era to the next, wanted to think of themselves as the Companions of the Prophet.⁵¹

The passages quoted and analyzed in this article were not merely meant to represent reality theoretically, but were recited, listened to, taught, and read ritually in order to induce existential transformations in their participants, both directly and through the other ritual practices they enjoined. While there have been substantial and important changes in the traditions of Sufism across time and place, these changes need to be contextualized in their full ritual, experiential and metaphysical contexts, and not just historically or sociopolitically. Authors of doctrinal works of Sufism such as al-Hamadānī, Ibn al-‘Arabī and al-Jilī repeatedly insist that they “only speak of that which they have existentially experienced.”⁵² If we are to take them seriously, we must take into account the fact that the distinct spiritual paths and heights they (and others like them) have scaled lead to distinct vistas on reality, which is not necessarily the same as constituting mutually exclusive or competing theories or schools.⁵³ As the poet’s verse, oft-cited by the Sufi authors discussed above, states:

*Our expressions are diverse, while your loveliness is one
And everything alludes to that beauty*⁵⁴

Endnotes

1. For example, see Constance Padwick. *Muslim Devotion: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use* (New York: OneWorld, 1963) and Annemarie Schimmel. *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1985).

2. Valerie Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31, no.3 (1999): 351–369.

3. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1975), 216.
4. Eric Geoffroy. *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*. (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 51.
5. R. S. O'Fahey, and Bernd Radtke. "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered." *Der Islam* 70, no. 1 (1993): 52–87.
6. Hoffman, "Annihilation in the Messenger," 362.
7. This is similar to Ibn 'Arabi's comment on shadow plays, "Do you not see the one who sets up the image on the screen, He sets it up only so that the viewer will realize the knowledge of *wujūd's* actual situation, The viewer sees numerous forms whose movements activities, and properties belong to one entity that has none of this. What brings these things into existence, making them move and stand still between us and Him, is the screen that is set up. It is the separating limit between us and him, through which distinction occurs." Translation, William Chittick. *The Self-Disclosure of God*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 60).
8. Ibrahim Niasse, *Jawāhir al-Rasā'il I* (n.p, n.d), 60–1. A recording of the sermon can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsOWmEOK7fI>
9. This section of the Mauritanian sermon is often cited to explain Niasse's better-known statement "For me, the Knower is he who has been annihilated once in the Essence, two or three times in the Attribute, and once in the Name" (the Attributes being the Messenger, Shaykh Ahmad Tijani, and Shaykh Ibrahim). See: Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth Century Sufi Revival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94–99 for a complementary discussion of this schema.
10. Tidiane Cissé. *What the Knowers of Allah have said about the Knowledge of Allah*. (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 95–97.
11. Ibrahim Niasse, *Removal of Confusion* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 233.
12. Hoffman, "Annihilation in the Messenger," 354. cf. Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyyah*, 4:184.
13. *Futuhāt* Chp. 560 qtd. in William Chittick, *Sufi Path, of Knowledge*. (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 351–2.
14. *Futuhāt* Chp. 560 quoted in Claude Addas, "At the distance of two bows' length or even closer: Part 1" *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, Volume 46, 2010. <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/qab-qawsayn-1.html>. Accessed Sept. 25th, 2016.
15. As Hoffman notes, "Annihilation in the shaykh' (*fanā' fi'l-shaykh*) is based on the idea that the shaykh is the most perfect manifestation of the Prophet available to the disciple, and the Prophet is in turn the most perfect manifestation of God. Disciples who visualize their shaykh in meditation and love him deeply may attain to such a deep identification with the shaykh as to achieve 'annihilation' of their own egos in him. In so doing, the disciple acquires some of the spiritual realizations of the shaykh, which ultimately leads the disciple into the presence of the Prophet, as he sees the Prophet through his shaykh. It is not certain when this practice developed, although Annemarie Schimmel cites the phrase *fanā' fi'l-shaykh* from a poem by Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. 1220)." Hoffman. "Annihilation in the Messenger," 367 n33.
16. This phrase appears at the end of the *Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ* of the Egyptian Shaykh Muḥammad al-Bakrī (d. 1545) one of the most popular prayers on the prophet used in the Tijani tradition and other Sufi orders to lead the aspirant to the experience of *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*.
17. See Muslim 1:299, and Bukhari's books of *Tawḥīd* 23, 24, and *Riqāq* 52. For additional references, see William Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Hadīth Qudsi*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 134–135.

18. *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* 'Afifi, 135–6 qtd. In Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1984), 254; also see Caner K. Dagli, *Ringstones of Wisdom* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004), 115–6 for an alternate translation.

19. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 350.

20. *Ibid.*, 219.

21. Translations from Muhammad Rustom, *Inrushes of the Spirit: The Mystical Theology of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt*, book manuscript, quoted with permission.

22. This prayer is one of the earliest “metaphysical” *taṣliyah* (prayers on the Prophet), and is certainly the forerunner of prayers such as the *Ṣalat al-'Azīmiyyah* of Aḥmad Ibn Idris and the *Jawharat al-Kamāl* of Shaykh Aḥmad Tijāni and other lengthy and cosmologically-inflected prayers on the Prophet. Several commentaries on the prayer of Ibn Mashish are recorded in Nabhānī's *Jawāhir al-bihār*; the Moroccan Sufi Ibn 'Ajibah (d. 1809), 'Abd Allāh Mīrghani al-Mahjūb (d. 1793) and the Ottoman Isma'īl Haqqī Bursawī (d. 1725) wrote some of the more well-known among the many commentaries on this prayer, which is still widely recited to this day.

23. Titus Burckhardt. “The Prayer of Ibn Mashish: Translation and Commentary.” *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 12, no. 1 & 2. (1978). http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/The_Prayer_of_Ibn_Mashish-translation_and_commentary_by_Titus_Burckhardt.aspx#_ftnref13. Accessed Sept. 25, 2016.

24. In the language of the prayer, “the realization of the first reality,” (*taḥqīq al-ḥaqq al-awwal*), the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyah*) which elsewhere in the prayer, Ibn Mashish describes as the origin and root of all things.

25. An alternate reading is that the first half of each sentence refers to *fanā'* while the second halves (“pull me back...” and “so that I neither see nor hear...”) refers to *baqā'*. In either interpretation, the main point about the progression of the prayer stands.

26. Burckhardt, “The Prayer of Ibn Mashish.”

27. The title comes from a verse of Surat Najm describing the summit of the Prophet's nocturnal ascent (*mi'rāj*), *He drew nigh and came down [or drew nearer], till he was two bows' length or nearer* (53:8–9). For Ibn 'Arabi and his school “two bows” form the circumference of existence, and the diameter of the bows' strings is the Muḥammadan reality. Claude Addas writes, “Like many authors before him, especially Ibn 'Arabi, Jīlī refers in this sense to the symbolism of a circle which is divided through its middle by a line, each half-circle representing an arc. The upper half-circle illustrates the eternal being, the *Ḥaqq*, and the lower half-circle represents contingent beings, the *khalq*; and the line which both separates and joins them, and which participates in the nature of both, is the Muḥammadan Reality.” (Addas, “At the distance of two bows' length or even closer”). Ibn al-'Arabi writes, “*He was two bows' length away*. Nothing makes the two arcs manifest from the circle save the imagined line. It is sufficient that you have said that it is ‘imagined,’ since the imagined is that which has no *wujūd* [being] in its entity. The circle has been divided into two arcs, so the He-ness is identical with the circle, and it is nothing save the two arcs themselves. Hence the one arc is identical with the other arc respect of the He-ness, and you are the dividing, imagined line. The cosmos, next to the Real, is something imagined to have *wujūd*, not an existent thing. The ‘Existent’ and the ‘*wujūd*’ are nothing but the Entity of the Real. This is His words, *Or closer*. The ‘closer’ is the removal of this imagined thing. When it is removed from imagination, nothing remains but a circle, and the two arcs are not entified.” (Chittick, W. *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 237)

28. Jīlī, “Qāb al-Qawsayn” in *al-Imām al-Shaykh 'abd al-Karīm Jīlī* [n.d.] ed. 'Aṣim I. Al-Zarqāwī. Beirut: Dār Al-Kutub Al-'Almiyya li Al-Nashr, 266 cf. Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger,” 358.

29. The same word from Qur'an 6:91 cited by Ibn 'Arabi and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt that also features prominently in the *Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ* of al-Bakri and the *Ṣalāt al-'Azīmiyyah* of Aḥmad ibn Idris-prayers recited to bring disciples to the state of annihilation in the Messenger.

30. Claude Addas, "At the distance of two bows' length or even closer Part 2." *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, 46 (2010). <<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/qab-qawsayn-2.html>> Accessed Sept. 25, 2016.

31. *Ibid.*

32. The disciple and successor of Shaykh Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 1258).

33. Ibn 'Ajibah. *Al-futūḥāt al-ilāhiyyah* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Fikr, n.d.), 6. Emphasis mine.

34. John O'Kane and Bernd Radtke. *Pure Gold from the Words of Sayyidī 'Abd Al-'Azīz Al-Dabbāgh: Al-Dhabab Al-Ibrīz Min Kalām Sayyidī 'Abd Al-'Azīz Al-Dabbāgh*. (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), 129. Radtke and O'Kane point out that this prayer forms a part of Aḥmad ibn Idrīs' *Ṣalāt al-'Azīmiyyah*, which aspirants in the Idrīsī tradition recite in order to achieve *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*.

35. *Ibid.*, 131.

36. *Ibid.*, 133.

37. *Al-Ibrīz*, 511, qtd. in Hoffman "Annihilation in the Messenger," 360.

38. O'Kane and Radtke, *Pure Gold*, 760.

39. *Ibid.*, 765–66.

40. *Ibid.*, 713–4.

41. Fahey and Radtke, "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered," 70. However, some of their descriptions of *fanā' fi'l-rasūl*, especially those taken from al-Jilī's *Qāb al-Qawsayn*, suggest that annihilation in the Prophet takes the aspirant beyond his own annihilation in God.

42. *The Key to Salvation*, 105–6, 108.

43. Rustom, *Inrushes of the Spirit*, unpublished manuscript.

44. Ibrahim Niasse, *Maqāmāt al-Dīn al-Thalāth in Sa'ādah al-Anām* (Cairo: al-Sharikat al-Dawliyyah 1427 A.H. / 2006), 129–130. As Seesemann points out in *Divine Flood*, Niasse's treatise is a synthesis of an earlier Tijānī work, ibn Anbūjah's *Mizāb al-Raḥma*, which is in turn largely based on a 14th century work by the Andalusian scholar Muḥammad al-Anṣārī al-Sāḥilī (d. 1353).

45. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 219.

46. The ambiguity in the Arabic here alludes to the same point: *thumma danā fatadallā* (53:8) can be rendered as "then he [the Prophet] drew near and He [God] came down," or "then he [the Prophet] drew near and came down," or "then he [the Prophet] drew near and came closer." Ibn 'Arabi seems to prefer the first interpretation, most translators of the Qur'an into English, such as Pickthall, opt for the second, while Yusuf Ali favors the third, and the new Harper Collins' *Study Qur'an* opts for the third in its translation but notes the first interpretation in its commentary. With his characteristic flair for synthesis, in the context of passage above, Ibn al-'Arabī cites the hadith "If you let down a rope it will fall on God" to show that all three interpretations amount to the same thing: the Prophet "coming down" is also his "coming closer," which is also God's "coming down" or "coming closer." See Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 236–7.

47. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 237.

48. See James Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'raj." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 (1987): 629–652, and 108 (1988): 63–77.

49. For example, see 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī's *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, 122–3 (Cairo, 1992). Mullā Ṣadrā describes four journeys (which structure and provide the title of his magnum opus, *The Four Journeys*): from creation to the Real (*min al-khalq ilā al-Haqq*), from the Real to the Real by the Real (*min al-Haqq ilā al-Haqq b'il-Haqq*), from the real to creation by/with the Real (*min al-Haqq ilā al-khalq b'il-Haqq*), and from creation to creation by/with the Real (*min al-khalq ilā al-khalq b'il-Haqq*).

50. In fact this ascending-descending description can be discerned in the Qur'anic account of the *mi'rāj* found in Surah Najm (53:1–18) (which many of the authors above refer to in their

discussions of *fanā'*, *baqā'*, and following the Prophet) in which the God first *reveals* to the Prophet *what He reveals* while he is at *the distance of two bows' length or nearer* (53:9–11), and then, during *another descent*, when *that which enshrouded the lote tree enshrouded it...* the Prophet *saw of the signs of his Lord, the greatest* (53:13–18). Ibn al-'Arabi identifies this lote tree with the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-Ḥaḳīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah*), the return to creation after *fanā'*, and the entire cosmos itself. See his *Shajarat al-kawn* (translated by Maurice Gloton as *L'Arbre du Monde*, (Paris, 1982), and *Risālah al-ittiḥād al-kawnī*. (translated by Angela Jaffray as *The Universal Tree and the Four Birds*, (Oxford, 2006).

51. Addas, "At the distance of two bows' length or even closer" Part 2.

52. See Addas, "At the distance of two bows' length or even closer" Part 2.

53. For an example of this unfortunate tendency to treat "mystical" doctrinal formulations as if they were contemporary academic philosophical or scientific theories see Mehdi Aminrazavi's otherwise excellent *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1997), 113–117.

54. *'Ibārātunā shattā wa ḥusnuka wāḥid / wa kullun ilā dhāka al-jamāli yushīru*