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St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology  
**Recognition (*ma'rifa*)**

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First published: 22 April 2025

<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Recognition>

**Citation**

Chittick, William C. and Mohammed Rustom. 2025. 'Recognition (*ma'rifa*)', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. Edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Recognition> Accessed: 13 June 2026

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ISSN 2753-3492

# Recognition (*maʿrifa*)

*William C. Chittick and Mohammed Rustom*

*Maʿrifa* and the less commonly used *ʿirfān* are verbal nouns derived from the root *ʿ-r-f* (for the various meanings of this root, see *Lane's Lexicon*, s.v. *ʿ-r-f*). Like *ʿilm*, which is often considered its synonym, *maʿrifa* means 'to know'. Scholars in all disciplines have offered definitions and explanations for the word *ʿilm*, frequently explaining that *maʿrifa* has a comparable meaning, though with distinctive connotations. The best overview of the countless scholarly disquisitions on *ʿilm* remains Franz Rosenthal's *Knowledge Triumphant* (2007; see especially 53–55, 108–129, 165–168). Here we focus on the distinctive meaning given to *maʿrifa* by Sufis and philosophers who have paid special attention to *ʿilm al-nafs*, 'knowledge of the soul' (usually translated as 'psychology'), which they saw as preparation for *maʿrifat al-nafs*, 'recognizing the soul'.

Specialists have not reached a consensus about how to translate *maʿrifa*. Most commonly they use 'gnosis', but this word has no verbal form in English, so the frequent use of the verb in the Qur'an, Islamic literature, and everyday language is lost to sight. Moreover, 'gnosis' suggests a heresy left over from pre-Islamic times, and some scholars have been happy to think that this is indeed the case. Other terms have been suggested when the word is not simply a synonym for *ʿilm*. These include 'mystical knowledge', 'experiential knowledge', 'intuition', and 'theosophy' (see, inter alia, Arnaldez 2012; Renard 2004; Shah-Kazemi 2002; Treiger 2011; Rustom Forthcoming). Authors writing in Persian have typically translated *maʿrifa* as *shinākhtan*, 'to recognize' (not *dānistan*, 'to know') (Dihkhudā [n.d.], s.v. 'maʿrifat'; Rustom 2023; Sajjādī 1991: 730–732). The opposite of *maʿrifa* is *nakar*, non-recognizing. In grammar, *maʿrifa* designates the use of the article *al-* to indicate a definite noun; *nakira* then refers to an indefinite noun, namely one that is not recognized.

Although *maʿrifa* and *ʿirfān* are linguistic synonyms, from about the seventeenth century onwards *ʿirfān* has often been used to designate the theoretical side of Sufism (Anzali 2017; Asghari 2025; for *ʿirfān* as 'philosophical/theoretical Sufism', see Ali 2022; Dagli 2016; Nasr 2005). This has led some scholars to read this understanding of *ʿirfān* back into Islamic history (Böwering 2012). Recent studies have looked at the continuing attention given to *maʿrifa* in cultures as far apart as those of West Africa and Iran (Ogunnaike 2020; Golestaneh 2023).

**Keywords:** Islamic thought, Recognition, Recognizers, Knowledge, Signs, Remembrance, Finding, Bewilderment, Knowing/not knowing

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# 1 The Qur'an and Hadith

The root 'r-f appears seventy-one times in the Qur'an. The verb's simple form implies knowledge that already exists, but only comes to be recognized by some stimulus, such as verses of the Qur'an or signs and marks that remind people of what they already know (see Rustom Forthcoming). The Qur'an says that Jews and Christians recognize the Qur'an 'as they recognize their own children' (Q. 6:20). Christians weep at hearing the Qur'an because of the *ḥaqq* (the truth and reality) that they recognize therein (Q. 5:83). The Jews of Medina, 'when that which they recognized came to them, disbelieved in it' (Q. 2:89). In five verses, the Qur'an speaks of the object of recognition as *sīmā*, 'marks'. Speaking of people whose hearts are ill with unbelief, it addresses the Prophet, 'Had We so willed, We would show them to thee. Then thou wouldst recognize them by their marks; and thou shalt certainly recognize them in the tone of their talk' (Q. 47:30).

The root *n-k-r* is used in thirty-seven Qur'anic verses, usually in derivatives of the fourth form of the verb, *inkār*, which means to deny or to claim not to recognize. The Qur'an says, for example, that the prophet Joseph (Yūsuf) recognized ('*arafa*) his brothers, but they failed to recognize him (*nakarūhu*, Q. 12:58). People generally are said to 'recognize God's blessing', but then 'they deny it' (*yunkirūnahu*, Q. 16:83). Most of the mentions of this root come in the form *munkar*, the past participle of *inkār*. The Qur'an contrasts it with the past participle of *ma'rifa*, namely *ma'rūf*, 'recognized'. The *ma'rūf* is that which is recognized as correct, honourable, dignified, and praiseworthy. The *munkar* is the opposite: unrecognized, wrong, denied, dishonourable, blameworthy (Izutsu 2002: 213–217; Kennedy 2016: 51–52). The Prophet and the faithful 'command the recognized and forbid the unrecognized' (Q. 7:157; 9:71; 31:17). The hypocrites do the opposite (Q. 9:67; see also Q. 3:104; 3:114). Jurists frequently discussed the implications of commanding the recognized and forbidding the unrecognized, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) dedicated Book 19 of his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 'Giving Life to the Knowledges of the Religion', to the topic (al-Ghazālī 2011: 4:537–705).

*Ma'rifa* and its derivatives come up frequently in the Hadith literature. The Prophet defined faith (*īmān*), for example, as 'recognizing in the heart, voicing with the tongue, and acting with the limbs' (Ibn Māja, *Sunan, Kitāb al-qadīma, Bāb fī al-īmān*, 65). Speaking of a believer who meets God in the afterlife, the Prophet says that God will recount his sins to him and ask him if he recognizes them. When he says that he does, God will forgive him (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Kitāb al-tawba, Bāb qabūl tawbat al-qātil wa in kathura qatluhu*, 2768). In a description of the resurrection, the Prophet says that God will appear to people and disclose Himself to them in forms (*ṣuwar*) that they do not recognize. They keep on failing to recognize Him (*nakarū*) until He discloses Himself to them in a form that they do recognize (see Rustom 2014: 135–136).

One of the most commonly cited hadiths in Sufi literature from the twelfth century onwards is that of the Hidden Treasure (on its provenance, see Chittick 1989: 391, note 14). In its best-known version, God says, ‘I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be recognized; so I created the creatures so that I would be recognized.’ It is typically quoted to highlight two teachings: that God created human beings because of His love for them, and that the goal of human existence is to recognize God and to love Him as He deserves.

## 2 Recognition and knowledge

The well-known dictionary *Kashshāf iṣṭilāḥāt al-funūn wa al-‘ulūm* (Unveiler of the Terminology of the Disciplines and the Knowledges) by Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Tahāwanī (d. 1158/1745) provides an extensive discussion of *ma‘rifa*, both as a synonym of ‘ilm and as a distinct form of knowing that follows upon non-recognition. God’s knowledge is called ‘ilm, not *ma‘rifa*, because, as the Qur’an says repeatedly, ‘He knows everything’, and this rule applies always and forever. Al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) puts the issue in a nutshell: ‘[Recognition is] the perception of a thing as it is, but preceded by ignorance. This is [...] why God is called “knower” but not “recognizer”’ (al-Jurjānī [n.d.], *Ta‘rīfāt*, s.v. *ma‘rifa*).

In Islamic scholarship generally, the word ‘ilm tends to highlight what is known and learned rather than the act of knowing itself. In contrast, *ma‘rifa* tends to designate unmediated knowing. The distinction can sometimes be seen in the way the plurals are used. The word ‘ulūm, ‘knowledges’ (or ‘sciences’), typically designates fields of knowledge that are gained by transmission (*naql*) from others. The word *ma‘ārif*, ‘recognitions’, is more likely to designate forms of knowing that are in principle accessible to the intellect (‘aql) without transmission. Hence the ‘knowledges’ include language, Qur’an, Hadith, grammar, history, jurisprudence, and so on – all of which depend on memory and transmission. The ‘recognitions’, on the other hand, are forms of knowing that are implicit in consciousness and awareness; examples include mathematics and philosophy, which are mastered by recognizing the truths that are present in the soul (the microcosm), in the cosmos (the macrocosm), and before all in God’s omniscience. To put it another way, transmitted knowledge is gained by imitation (*taqlīd*), that is, by accepting hearsay as truth. In contrast, recognition derives from realization (*taḥqīq*), that is, by finding the truth (*ḥaqq*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*) in oneself (Chittick 2007).

The Islamic tradition considers ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) to be the first master of *ma‘rifa* after the Prophet. The Prophet’s saying, ‘I am the city of knowledge and ‘Alī is its gate’, was understood to mean that ‘Alī opens the door to recognizing God. ‘Alī points to the foundational role of recognition in the initial oration of his compiled sayings, the *Nahj al-balāgha* (The Path of Eloquence), where he says: ‘The first of the religion is recognizing Him’ (*awwal al-dīn ma‘rifatuhu*) (al-Sharīf al-Raḍī 2024: 106 [Arabic text]). Although *ma‘rifa*

here is commonly translated as ‘knowledge’, ‘Alī insists in this and other passages that God is unknowable because of His infinite grandeur, much in line with the saying of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), the Prophet’s Companion and the first caliph: ‘Glorified is He who made no path for His creatures to recognize Him except the incapacity to recognize Him’ (al-Qushayrī 2017: 621; see also ‘Ayn al-Qudāt 2023: 69–70; Rustom 2023: 155–157).

That God is recognized by the impossibility of recognizing Him becomes a frequent theme. True knowledge of God is to know that He is unknowable. Yet, ‘the first of the religion is recognizing Him’, so the religion itself is based on recognition. For those who recognize that they do not recognize God, the result can be – or perhaps should be – perplexity and ‘bewilderment’ (*ḥayra*). The answer to significant questions becomes ‘yes and no’, a point that in many ways is the focus of the writings of one of the greatest ‘recognizers’ of the tradition, namely Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Chittick 1989).

The most important *locus classicus* for the Sufi understanding of *ma‘rifa* is a saying that is attributed both to the Prophet and to ‘Alī: ‘He who recognizes his soul will recognize his Lord’. True knowledge of God depends upon understanding one’s own situation and grasping that God is totally other. In a short chapter called ‘Recognizing God’ in his classic *Risāla* or ‘Treatise’ on Sufism, the Qur’anic commentator Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) cites these words from Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910), generally considered the greatest of the early Sufi shaykhs:

The first wisdom that the servant needs is for the artifact to recognize its Artisan and for the newly arrived thing [to recognize] how it was given new arrival. Then the servant will recognize the attribute of the Creator relative to the created thing and the attribute of the Eternal relative to the newly arrived. He will be abased toward His invitation, and he will acknowledge [*ya‘tarifu*] the necessity of obeying Him. For, if he does not recognize his Owner, he will not acknowledge that the owned belongs necessarily to Him. (al-Qushayrī 2017: 85)

‘Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. 469/1077), author of one of the earliest Sufi texts in Persian, *Kashf al-maḥjūb* (‘The Disclosure of the Veiled’, translated by R. A. Nicholson in 1911), has a chapter on *ma‘rifa* in which he points out that there are two routes to recognizing God, namely knowledge (*‘ilm*) and state (*ḥāl*). A ‘state’ is a gift (*wahb*) from God that comes to the soul without trying to acquire it (*kasb*). He explains that recognition by knowledge is ‘the foundation of all the good things of this world and the next. The most important thing for the servant in all times and states is recognizing God’ (al-Hujwīrī 1997: 387). This sort of recognition, he says, keeps the common people occupied. God has delivered a chosen few, however, from the darkness of this world. He has brought their hearts to life through Him and given them a light whereby they walk among people, and such are the recognizers. Al-Hujwīrī cites a saying of ‘Alī to illustrate their state: ‘I recognized God

through God, and I recognized what is apart from God through God's light'. In short, he writes:

Recognition is for the heart to live through the Real and for one's secret core [*sirr*] to turn away from other than the Real. The worth of each person lies in recognition, and anyone who has no recognition has no worth. Hence the scholars, jurists, and others call sound *knowledge* of the Lord 'recognition.' And the Sufi shaykhs call a sound state through the Lord 'recognition.' (al-Hujwiri 1997: 387, emphasis added)

### 3 The worldview

Recognizing one's own soul is the first prerequisite to recognizing God. This is a constant theme in Islamic thought. The soul must be recognized for the simple reason that people are forgetful of who they are. Forgetfulness is woven into people's nature as an inheritance from their father. Adam 'forgot' (Q. 20:115), which is perhaps surprising, given that God created him, as the Prophet said, 'in His form' (*ṣūra*), and 'taught him all the names' (Q. 2:30). The cure for forgetfulness is 'remembering' (*dhikr*), and the role of the prophets is to 'remind' (*dhikr*) people who God is and who they themselves are. Various forms of remembering God – reciting the Qur'an, performing the daily prayers, mentioning God's names – are universal Muslim practices. It is the Sufi teachers, however, who place the greatest stress on the discipline of remembering God's names, and it is they who provide the most detailed explanations of why remembrance is necessary. In brief, it provides the only route to recognition, which is the recovery of the knowledge that was woven into humanity's 'primordial nature' (*fiṭra*) when God taught Adam *all* the names (see Rustom Forthcoming). The similarity with Plato's notion of anamnesis is obvious.

Most early Sufi sayings about *ma'rifa* take the form of aphorisms aimed at awakening seekers to the reality of their own souls. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with the gradual integration of the various fields of learning by al-Ghazālī and others, sophisticated analyses of the human situation became more common. Even earlier, the Muslim philosophers had been especially concerned with understanding the role of knowledge in actualizing the reality of the soul; in their terms, the soul is a potential intellect (*'aql*) and the goal of life is to actualize its potentiality. Some of the most detailed expositions of the role played by *ma'rifa* are found in the fifty-two treatises of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', 'The Brethren of Limpidness' (fl. tenth–eleventh century). They offer a panorama of the sciences, a good deal of it going back to Greek wisdom, but integrated with the Qur'an and Hadith. Their treatises constantly talk about knowledge, using the word *ma'rifa* in about one-third of the instances (the Qur'anic ratio of *'-l-m* to *'-r-f* is about 10:1). One of their frequent themes is that true knowledge cannot be acquired by hearsay. It can only be had first-hand, within oneself, by perceiving and recognizing the knowledge that is already embedded in the soul.

The first treatise of the Ikhwān is devoted to ‘number’ (*‘adad*). They explain that philosophers study mathematics because it is a necessary preliminary for the study of the natural realm. The goal of learning, however, is to advance beyond the natural realm and to attain knowledge of ‘the godly things’ (*al-ilāhiyyāt*), a word that is often translated as ‘metaphysics’. Knowledge of the godly things depends on recognizing the soul. To emphasize the importance of this step in the process of actualizing the intellect, they call to witness the hadith of recognizing the soul along with various other prophetic sayings and Qur’anic verses (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ 2006: 1:76). In later treatises (including number twenty-three on the composition of the body, number forty on causes and effects, and number forty-eight on inviting to God), they review the scriptural sources and amplify their arguments for the primary importance of recognizing the soul. Implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – they are critical of the *‘ulamā’*, the ‘knowers’ – that is, the scholars of the religious sciences. Such scholars may be masters of transmitted learning, but those who have not recognized their own souls cannot guide people on the path to God. They are diseased physicians who have not cured themselves, guides on the road who are themselves lost. The Ikhwān stress that true knowers of the religion must be ‘recognizing knowers’ (*al-‘ulamā’ al-‘ārifūn*). Like countless Sufi teachers after them, they say that the only way to become a ‘friend of God’ (*walī Allāh*) is to recognize God as He truly is, and such recognition is contingent upon recognizing the soul (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ 2006: 3:483).

Avicenna (Abū ‘Alī ibn Sina, d. 428/1037), the greatest of the early philosophers, had a good deal to say about the significance of *ma‘rifa*, sometimes only in passing. In chapter 6 of his short *Risāla fī al-‘ishq* (Treatise on Love), for example, he speaks of the goal of human existence as deification (*ta‘alluh*), that is, actualizing the potential of the soul, created in the form of God. God created angels with perfect recognition of Him, but human souls have only the potential, for they ‘come into existence in a state of preparedness (*isti‘dād*)’. They cannot reach deification ‘so long as they have not achieved recognition of the Absolute Good’. It follows that the goal of all human endeavour should be to actualize the soul’s potential to recognize God.

That love and recognition are intertwined is a constant theme in the literature. Aḥmad Sam‘ānī (d. 534/1140), a younger contemporary of al-Ghazālī, wrote an extraordinarily beautiful, 500-page commentary on the divine names in Persian, celebrating the essential role played by love and beauty in the creation of Adam and his children. In a typical passage he writes:

When the Adamite was created, shortcoming was made his attribute. A tree was planted in his outwardness, and a tree was planted in his inwardness. The outer tree was called ‘the prescription of the Law.’ The inner tree was called ‘the bestowal of recognition.’ The fruit of the outer tree is service, and the fruit of the tree that bestows recognition is love. (Sam‘ānī 2019: 487)

Afḍal al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d. 606/1210), a philosopher writing in Persian, pointed out that existence and consciousness are essentially identical, a point that is implicit within the standard philosophical term for existence, *wujūd*. The Qur’anic meaning of this word is to find and perceive, with it being self-evident that anything that is found ‘exists’. Al-Kāshānī explains that the word *wujūd* has two basic senses: ‘to be’ (*hasī*) and ‘to find’ (*yāft*). The soul’s existence is its potential finding and perceiving, or, in Avicenna’s terms, its preparedness for recognition. It is only through actual recognition that the soul finds true existence, subsisting as an intelligent and intelligible light (Chittick 2001).

Al-Kāshānī’s contemporary, Ibn ‘Arabī, was the greatest and most prolific of the Sufi theoreticians, adopting much of the vocabulary of philosophy and theology as his own. He drives home the point that the unknowable Essence (*dhāt*) of God is nothing but the Necessary Existence of the philosophers. After him, the thirteenth century saw a great expansion of theoretical writing on recognizing God with the understanding that this recognition, powered by love, brings about the soul’s deification.

The increased emphasis on *ma‘rifa* relative to *‘ilm* is suggested by the titles of two of the greatest books of the tradition. Al-Ghazālī’s aforementioned forty-volume *lḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Giving Life to the Knowledges of the Religion) was written to remind Muslims of the meaning and goal of transmitted knowledge as accumulated over the centuries. Ibn ‘Arabī’s much longer tome, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, ‘The Meccan Openings’, deals explicitly with knowing the reality of things as they were ‘opened up’ (*futūḥ*) to the author when he knocked on God’s door. The subtitle of the book indicates that its content is what the author ‘recognized’ from the Qur’an and the Hadith (he almost never cites other sources): *Fī ma‘rifat al-asrār al-mālikiyya wa al-mulkiyya* (On Recognizing the Secrets of the Ownership and the Owned). The Owner and the owned are the Lord and the servant, or the Real and creation, and their ‘secrets’ are unveiled only to those who recognize their own souls. The names of well over 530 of the 560 chapters of the *Meccan Openings* begin with the words *Fī ma‘rifa*, ‘On recognizing’.

In Chapter 177, ‘On Recognizing the Station of Recognition’, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that Sufi teachers use the word *ma‘rifa* to refer to the knowledge they have gained firsthand, not what they have learned from others. He points out that recognition is a divine attribute, even though there is no divine name derived from the word. He then says that in the view of the Sufi shaykhs, recognition is a path, which is to say that it is ‘every knowledge that is gained only by deeds, godwariness, and wayfaring’. Wayfaring (*sulūk*) is the standard term for the rigorous discipline of the Sufi path. Godwariness (*taqwā*) is mentioned in the Qur’an as one of the most elevated of human qualities. In explaining its significance, Ibn ‘Arabī likes to quote the verse, ‘Be wary of God, and God will teach you’ (Q. 2:282) – that is, without the intermediary of anyone else. He points out that all other forms of knowledge are based on imitation (*taqlīd*): ‘No one can have sound knowledge except him

who recognizes things through his own essence. Anyone who recognizes something in addition to his essence is an imitator of that addition' (Ibn 'Arabī 1911: 2:298).

One outstanding scholar who wrote on foundational Islamic teachings in the wake of Ibn 'Arabī's work was Sa'īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 700/1300). A student of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Ibn 'Arabī's stepson and foremost interpreter, al-Farghānī wrote a two-volume commentary on the most famous Arabic poem in Sufi literature, the 760-verse qasida of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1234) called *Naẓm al-sulūk* (The Versification of the Wayfaring). This poem begins with a vision of God's beautiful face and then describes how the poet underwent a long period of suffering because of separation from his Beloved. Eventually God's love transmutes his soul, and he arrives at the station of perfection. The last 150 verses of the qasida describe the fruit of recognizing the soul and invite readers to follow in Muḥammad's footsteps so that they too may recognize their souls and their Lord.

In the 150-page prologue to his commentary, al-Farghānī offers an unprecedented overview of the metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and philosophical psychology that form the poem's backdrop. He begins by providing a detailed explication of the Hadith of the Hidden Treasure, stressing the foundational role of God's 'love to be recognized' and insisting on the unique human obligation to recognize God and love Him in return. Throughout the prologue and the commentary, al-Farghānī explains how the various dimensions of the human self – soul, spirit, heart, intellect, secret core, essence – are deeply rooted in the Real Existence. Towards the end, while explaining Ibn al-Fāriḍ's words, 'So look! Let the soul be recognized like this' (verse 744), he provides a long description of the soul's seven 'interiors' (*batn*). If seekers of God are to achieve the fullness of the recognition for the sake of which they were created, they must recognize all seven interiors, stage by stage. In the highest level of recognizing the soul – reached only by Muḥammad himself – the soul is nothing but the godly Essence, the Real *Wujūd* that is infinite existence and infinite consciousness (al-Farghānī 2007: 2:291–295).

Some of the most detailed and philosophically nuanced expositions of the intertwined reality of the soul and existence are provided by Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), who became known by the title *Ṣadr al-muta'allihīn*, 'the Foremost of the Deified.' His numerous books in Arabic integrate the various schools of philosophy that had developed over the centuries, as well as the theoretical Sufism represented by Ibn 'Arabī and many other scholars (not least Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, d. 672/1273). In the introduction to a short Persian treatise, Mullā Ṣadrā cites the hadith of recognizing the soul and explains that when people fail to recognize God, this brings them down to the level of dumb beasts. As a result, '[t]hey forget God, so He forgets them' (Q. 59:19). He continues:

Given that forgetting God is the cause of forgetting the soul, remembering the soul brings about remembering the Lord. And indeed, remembering the Lord brings about His remembering the soul: 'Remember Me and I will remember you' [Q. 2:152]. The Lord's

remembering the soul is the same as the soul's existence, for the Real's knowledge of things is by presence [with the things]. Hence, when someone does not recognize the soul, his soul will not have existence, for the soul's existence is the same as light, presence, and awareness. (Mullā Ṣadrā 1961: 14)

## 4 The bewilderment of knowing/not knowing

God in Himself is unknowable. The verse, 'They do not measure God with the rightful due [*ḥaqq*] of His measure' (Q. 6:91; 22:74; 39:67), was typically understood to mean that people recognize God only in their own measure, not in God's measure. As Junayd remarked when asked about the recognizer: 'The water takes on the colour of its cup' (al-Qushayrī 2017: 644).

The prolific Sufi scholar and Qur'anic commentator 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) explained the limitations of human understanding in a short treatise called *Fi ma'rifat Allāh* (On Recognizing God):

Know that the Real does not make Himself recognized to His servants except in the measure of their ability and capacity; He does not make Himself recognized to anyone with the rightful due of His realities. In reality no one recognizes Him apart from Him. Anyone who recognizes Him recognizes Him in the measure in which He unveils His recognition to him. (al-Sulamī 1990–2010: 355)

Most of the early books on Sufism are compilations of sayings by the great teachers. Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990) wrote one of the first, *al-Ta'arruf li-madhab al-taṣawwuf* ('Coming to Recognize the Walkway of Sufism', see al-Kalābādhī 1933; translated by A. J. Arberry as *The Doctrine of the Sufis*). Four of the book's seventy-five short chapters (21, 22, 60, and 62) discuss recognition and the recognizer.

The most famous of these early compilations of Sufi teachings is the already mentioned *Risāla* (Treatise) by al-Qushayrī, who quotes numerous short sayings, often with comments of his own. At the beginning of a relatively long chapter on *ma'rifa*, he says that the '*ulamā*' – meaning the scholars of transmitted learning – hold that *ma'rifa* is the same as '*ilm*'. In contrast, Sufi teachers say that it is the attribute of someone who recognizes the Real through His names and attributes, who is sincere towards God in his practices, and who gains recognition of his Lord to such a degree that he becomes a stranger to his own soul. He adds that the Sufi shaykhs have said a great deal about *ma'rifa*, 'And each of them spoke about what occurred for him and pointed to what he found at that moment' (al-Qushayrī 2017: 638–639).

By saying recognition goes back to what the recognizer 'found' at a specific moment, al-Qushayrī is differentiating recognition from learning. 'Finding' (*wijdān*) is the soul's awareness and consciousness, which is to say that it is the modality of the soul's very

existence (*wujūd*). And given that, as al-Ghazālī remarks, '[t]here is nothing in existence but God' (Chittick 2012: 72), when the soul finds, perceives, and recognizes, it does so by presence (*ḥuḍūr*) with the luminous existence of God, though each soul perceives that light in its own measure.

Al-Qushayrī writes that in the view of the shaykhs, '[r]ecognition demands the servant's absence from his soul because of being overcome by the remembrance of the Real, so he witnesses none but God and does not come back to other than Him' (al-Qushayrī 2017: 640). In contrast, he says, the intellect comes back to the heart, thought, and memory: 'But how can meaning enter the heart of him who has no heart? There is a difference between him who lives through his heart and him who lives through his Lord' (al-Qushayrī 2017: 640). Part of the difference is brought out in the saying, 'The recognizer is above what he says, but the knower is below what he says' (al-Qushayrī 2017: 644). In other words, the knower quotes knowledge transmitted from others or acquired with his intellect, but the recognizer is trying to articulate the ineffable and inexpressible face of God that he finds in his heart.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī (d. c. 470/1077) wrote a compilation of Sufi wisdom called *Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa al-sawād* (The Book of White and Black), dedicating an early chapter to '[t]heir words on recognition and the reality of the recognizer'. One of the longer sayings he quotes brings together several common themes, among them that the recognizer's absence from himself brings about God's presence. He says that Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. c. 245/859) was asked about the recognizer's character (*khuluq*). He replied:

Seeing, not knowing; the thing itself, not the report; witnessing, not describing; unveiling, not veiling. They are not they and they are not in themselves; rather, they are in the Real. Their activity is through the Real's activity for them. Their speech is the Real's talking on their tongues. Their gazing is the Real's gazing through their eyesight. This is why the Prophet said, narrating from his Lord, 'When I love him, I am his hearing and his seeing.' (al-Sīrjānī 2012: 68)

Probably the longest corpus of aphorisms and short sayings by a single author is that by Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. 354/965). Arberry published a critical edition of al-Niffarī's two texts along with an English translation (on *ma'rifa*, see Arberry's remarks in al-Niffarī 1935: 16–18). Each of al-Niffarī's brief passages consists of a saying of God addressed to him, but in words that often seem designed to bewilder the reader. To give a flavour, we cite the second paragraph of the first chapter, which points to God's unknowability:

He said to me, 'I am nearer to each thing than its recognition of its soul. So its recognition will not pass beyond it to Me, nor will it recognize Me when its soul gives it recognition.' (al-Niffarī 1935: 1)

The most sophisticated of the several commentaries on al-Niffarī was written by ‘Affī al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291), another major student of Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. Al-Tilimsānī’s philosophical precision in his commentary provides numerous insights into the reality of recognizing God. We provide one small sample, an introductory paragraph in the chapter from al-Niffarī’s work that begins, ‘He put me in the halting place of recognizing the recognitions’. Al-Tilimsānī writes:

Know that recognizing the recognitions is a station, but it is beneath the station of recognition. This is because recognition is recognizing God gradually from the levels of His names, His attributes, and His acts, so it is related to God. As for recognizing the recognitions, it is the recognition of that recognition, so it is related to the forms of recognizing God, not to God. Hence it is an isthmus [*barzakh*] between knowledge that veils and the recognition of God. (al-Tilimsānī 2000: 168)

The most famous of the many texts describing the stages on the path to achieving union with God is *Manāzil al-sā’irīn* (The Waystations of the Voyagers), written by ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089). In terse Arabic prose he describes one hundred waystations divided into ten divisions of ten each, each waystation having three ascending degrees. The last of the ten divisions is called the ends (*nihāyāt*), and the first of the ends (the ninety-first waystation) is called recognition. He defines the word as ‘encompassing the entity of the thing as it is’ (al-Anṣārī 1988: 125). Its first degree, that of the believers, is recognizing the divine attributes as they are named in the Qur’an and Hadith and as their signs appear in the created realm. The second degree, that of the elect, is recognizing God’s Essence by eliminating the distinction between the Essence and the attributes, undergoing annihilation (*fanā’*), and reaching subsistence (*baqā’*) in God. The third degree, that of the elect of the elect, is a recognition drowned in nothing but God’s bestowal of recognition (*ta’rīf*) without any intermediary whatsoever.

In the short *Awṣāf al-ashrāf* (The Attributes of the Noble), the philosopher-scientist Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) provides a description of the path to God reminiscent of al-Anṣārī’s book, but with more philosophical precision. He describes recognition of God as the twenty-second of thirty-one ascending stages that lead the soul to its final goal, which is annihilation in God. Recognition has five levels, he says, the lowest of which belongs to those who recognize God only by hearsay. The highest belongs to those who reach presence with God. He compares the levels to five degrees of recognizing fire: hearing the name, knowing logically that it exists, seeing it from a distance, being heated by it, and being consumed by it (al-Ṭūsī 2011: 73–74).

In his well-known book *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* (The Terminology of the Sufis), ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 735/1335), a third-generation follower of Ibn ‘Arabī, describes the

‘recognizer’ by saying that his knowledge comes from ‘witnessing’ (*mushāhada*), a term that designates unmediated seeing with the heart:

The recognizer is he whom God gives to witness His Essence, His attributes, His names, and His acts, so recognition is a state that occurs from his witnessing. As for the knower, God gives him cognizance of that, based not on witnessing but on certainty. The common people are those whose knowledge is limited to the Shariah. Their knowers are ‘the knowers of the customs’ [*ulamā’ al-rusūm*]. (al-Kāshānī 1998: 124–125)

The aphoristic style of most early Sufi works makes an appearance in Avicenna’s overview of his own philosophy, called *al-Ishārāt wa al-tanbīhāt* (The Allusions and the Alerts). The penultimate section of the book is named *Fī maqāmāt al-‘arīfīn* (On the Stations of the Recognizers). The second of its twenty-seven brief chapters reads like this:

He who turns away from the enjoyment and pleasures of this world is specified for the name ‘renunciant’ [*zāhid*]. He who is diligent in doing the acts of worship like standing in prayer, fasting, and so on is specified for the name ‘worshiper’ [*‘ābid*]. He who turns with his thought to the holiness of the Jabarūt [i.e. the world of the Divinity], seeking the continuation of the radiance of the Real’s light in his secret core, is specified for the name ‘recognizer’. (Avicenna 2013: 355–356)

In Chapter 5 of this section, Avicenna voices the common theme in Sufi literature that those who achieve true *tawhīd* have no concern for anything other than God:

The recognizer does not desire the First Real for anything other than Him and prefers nothing over recognizing Him. He devotes his worship to Him alone because He is worthy of worship and because this is an eminent relation with Him, not because of eagerness [for paradise] or dread [of hell]. If there is either of these [...] then the Real is not the goal. Rather, He is the intermediary to some other goal that is sought apart from Him. (Avicenna 2013: 357–358)

Avicenna’s last chapter on the recognizers cautions the ‘*ulamā’* against dismissing *ma‘rifa* as unverifiable claims, citing a well-known hadith to remind its readers that people are diverse in knowledge and understanding. Those who fail to recognize recognition should look for the problem in their own souls, not in teachers and texts:

The Threshold of the Real is too majestic to be a watering place for everyone who approaches; no one becomes cognizant of it except one after one. This is why what is included in this art is ridiculed by the heedless and an object lesson for the accomplished. If anyone hears of it and recoils from it, let him suspect that his soul has no correspondence with it. [For, as the Prophet said,] ‘Everyone will be eased to that for which he was created.’ (Avicenna 2013: 367)

The crux of recognition, then, goes back to the soul. The soul's recognition of God is, as 'Alī said, 'the first of the religion'. But recognizing God demands recognizing the soul's incapacity to recognize God. The texts maintain simultaneously that God must be recognized and that He cannot be recognized. Can we then recognize our own souls? Yes and no. As Ibn 'Arabī remarks,

I think – and God knows best – that He commanded us to recognize Him and turned us over to our souls in gaining this recognition only because He knew that we do not perceive and do not know the reality of our souls and that we are incapable of recognizing our souls. Hence, we come to know that we are even more incapable of Him. So, this is recognition of Him/non-recognition. (Ibn 'Arabī 1911: 3:412)

The sophisticated philosophical Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī and those who followed in his footsteps could only be read and understood by a relatively small number of the '*ulamā*', but this should not be taken to mean that Ibn 'Arabī's focus on *ma'rifa* was somehow different from that of the numerous shaykhs who were teaching more popular forms of Sufism. Take, for example, '*Awārif al-ma'ārif*' by Ibn 'Arabī's contemporary, Shihāb al-Dīn 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), who is typically given credit for putting Sufism on a firm institutional base. This book was one of the most widely disseminated works on Sufi theory and practice from the thirteenth century onwards (Kars 2022). The title puts the focus on *ma'rifa*, not least with its first word, '*awārif*', the plural of '*ārif*', which has several meanings (including 'recognized'). When explaining the title in the text's introduction, al-Suhrawardī makes the word a synonym of *minaḥ* (gifts), so the best way to translate the title may be 'The Bestowals of the Recognitions'. His basic point throughout the book is that Sufi shaykhs teach the religion on the basis of a realized, actualized knowledge bestowed on them by their dedication to God and the Prophet.

Although '*Awārif al-ma'ārif*' was translated into Persian at least three times before the modern era, an influential Persian text based on al-Suhrawardī's teachings gained much more widespread popularity, namely *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāya* (The Lamp of Guidance) by 'Izz al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Kāshānī (d. 735/1334–1335). Unlike the writings of his compatriot 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, this book shows no trace of the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, while giving a high profile to *ma'rifa*. After devoting a section to beliefs and another to the various sorts of knowledge, 'Izz al-Dīn devotes about ten percent of the 400-page text to the recognitions, explaining in detail how the seeker of God needs to recognize his soul in all its dimensions, including the spirit, the heart, and the secret core. He explains the word *ma'rifa* as meaning knowledge of the differentiated details of things after gaining a summary knowledge. In the case of God, the word demands not only knowledge of *tawḥīd* and the other foundational teachings of the religion, which are gained initially by imitation, but also 'recognizing and seeing, without hesitation and deliberation',

that God is present in all created things. The more God is recognized, however, the more difficult it becomes to differentiate recognition from non-recognition. He explains:

Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh said, 'Recognition is to recognize ignorance.' The more the levels of nearness increase and the more the traces of the divine tremendousness become manifest, the more the knowledge of ignorance and the recognition of nonrecognition are gained. Hence bewilderment piles upon bewilderment, and from the recognizer's makeup the cry rises up, 'My Lord, increase my bewilderment in You!'

In the next sentence, 'Izz al-Dīn makes a point that needs to be kept in mind whenever there is mention of *ma'rifa*. It is that talk of *ma'rifa* is not *ma'rifa*, but rather 'knowledge of *ma'rifa*' transmitted to the talker. True *ma'rifa* can only be found within oneself:

But, this meaning that is being explained is the knowledge of recognition, not recognition, for recognition is an affair of finding [*wijdānī*], and explanation falls short. Nonetheless, knowledge is its introduction, so recognition without knowledge is impossible, and knowledge without recognition is baneful. (al-Kāshānī 1944: 82)

It is difficult to open any text on Sufism after the thirteenth century without meeting the recognizer as the embodiment of the perfection that is sought by those who are striving to follow in Muḥammad's footsteps. A good example of this general understanding is provided by Khwāja Khurd (d. 1073/1663), one of the sons of Bāqī Billāh (d. 1012/1603), who hailed from present-day Afghanistan and put the Naqshbandī Order on a firm footing in India. Khwāja Khurd wrote several treatises in Arabic and Persian, one of the latter being a two-page gem called 'Ārif, 'The Recognizer'.

The recognizer does all good works without wanting anything in the midst. He avoids all bad works without denying bad works. He mixes with everyone without the mind's attachment, and he is far from everyone without aversion. He knows God as the same as all things and sees Him in all, without calling any of them God. He finds God beyond all things, without the entrance of duality [...]. The recognizer is both the Real and creation [...]. The recognizer knows all and knows nothing. The recognizer's work is all opposite in opposite and bewilderment in bewilderment [...].

'Recognizer' is no more than a name. Rather, he is the same as the recognized. The recognized is no more than a name. Rather, it is the same as the recognizer. Recognizer and recognized are no more than two illusory names. Where is the recognizer? Where is the recognized? This is the reality of the state, which has no reality whatsoever. This is the end of the recognized, which is the same as bewilderment and ignorance. Where is recognition? Where is bewilderment? Both are lost in the reality of the recognizer's essence. (Khurd 1989: 23–24)

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