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TREATISE ON THE INVOCATION OF THE DIVINE NAME

Shaykh Ahmad Al-ʿAlawī

Shaykh Ahmad Al-ʿAlawī *was born in Mostaghanem, Algeria, in 1869. He never obtained any formal schooling, although he learned the Qur'ān from his father at home. He later earned his living as a cobbler, but he was deeply religious by nature, and thirsty for knowledge. His meeting with his spiritual master, Shaykh Muhammad Al-Būzīdī, was crucial in his spiritual awakening. Al-ʿAlawī had at that time been involved in developing magical powers such as charming snakes, but Shaykh Al-Būzīdī turned him away from this and awakened him to his true nature. After his master's death, Al-ʿAlawī was elected to succeed him as Shaykh. He first resisted this call, and for several months in 1909 traveled to Tunis, Tripoli, and Istanbul. Upon his return to Algeria, however, Al-ʿAlawī duly assumed his spiritual function and became so influential that, as early as 1923, he was reported as having in the region of one hundred thousand disciples. The Shaykh Al-ʿAlawī died in 1934. His emphasis on the way of the invocation is beautifully expressed in his statement: "Remembrance is the mightiest rule of the religion. . . . The law was not enjoined upon us, neither were the rites of worship ordained, but for the sake of establishing the remembrance of God." The epistle from which the following passages have been excerpted was addressed to a fellow Muslim who held the Sufi practice of the invocation of the Name of God in suspicion.*

I observed during our brief conversation that you felt rancor, or so it seemed to me, against your brethren the ʿAlawites not for any sin they committed, but because they ceaselessly pronounce the Unique Name *Allāh*. You feel that this deserves reproof or let us say chastisement, for according to you, they devote themselves to this Name whether it is appropriate to do so or not; according to you, it does not matter to them if they happen to be in the street in a place that is deemed unsuitable for such an utterance. This is true, you say, to such an extent that when one of them knocks on the door, he says *Allāh*, when someone calls to him, he says *Allāh*, when he stands he says *Allāh*, when he sits he says *Allāh*, and so on.

In addition, you are of the opinion that this Name does not merit being called a form of invocation as it does not, according to you, constitute a complete sentence (*kalām mufīd*), based on what the grammarians have determined as being necessary components of grammatical constructions.

I am answering you concerning all these things solely for the purpose of arriving at an understanding, and in order to determine the correctness of

the 'Alawites' actions. The question is, is this permissible or not? I write this missive in the hope that it might provide a cure for the heart and rest for the soul.

To begin with, what you say about what grammarians' stipulations of necessary constituents of complete sentences is correct, except that you do not realize that when the grammarians laid down this rule it pertained to the classification of a form of speech that conveys a meaning to the listener. They had no thought of applying this criterion to forms of invocation, of judging its legality or illegality, of discussing the rewards due for accomplishing it, and so on. Were you to have asked them about this in their day or were you to do so today, they would undoubtedly answer by saying, "What we have stipulated in that regard is merely a technical formulation which we use in our field, for such formulations prevent ambiguity of meaning in our discussions." You are well aware of the fact that the formulations used by grammarians differ from those used by theologians, which differ in their turn from those used by doctors of the law, and these differ once again from those used by specialists in the origins of law and so on. In this way, every group uses its own terminology, which leads us to conclude that the grammarians were for their part concerned with the identification of complete sentences—that speech which benefits the person addressed in some way. They were not concerned with distinguishing lawful invocations from unlawful ones. In other words, conditions about the requirements of grammatical speech are meant in particular for him who wishes, by his words, to inform someone of something. The one who invokes, however, does it only to benefit his soul and in order to establish the meaning of the noble Name firmly in his heart, and other intentions of this kind. Moreover, the grammarians did not formulate these conditions so as to include the expressions of a grieving or saddened man, for the latter's intention is not that of the grammarians. The grammarian would hardly say to him, "I do not understand what you mean by your sighs and groans, for they are not a grammatical statement—they need some explanation," or the like. The intention of the saddened or grieving man is not to inform others of anything, but only to console his heart. In the same way, the intention of one who invokes the Name is to have it become imprinted permanently in his soul.

You know, brother, that every name has an influence that attaches itself to the soul of him who utters it, even if it is not one of the divine Names. For example, if a man repeats the word "death" he will feel an effect which attaches itself to him on account of mentioning this word, especially if he persists in it. This effect will undoubtedly be different from the one had by the mention

of "money," "power," or "authority," even without considering this in the light of the noble *hadīth*: "Increase in remembrance of the Destroyer of Pleasures" (*hazim al-Ladhdhāt*), the reference here being to death. The word death is but one word yet it is said that among some of the first believers it formed an entire litany. Every man with a sense of the subtle is aware of the effect of what is mentioned on the soul, whether it be something serious or light-hearted. If we admit this, then we are bound to admit also that the Name of God has an influence on the soul, as do other names, each to its own degree. And brother, do not lose sight of the fact that a name is as noble as that which is named, inasmuch as it bears its imprint in the folds of its secret essence and meaning.

Now let us cease to consider everything set forth above, and concern ourselves solely with the judgment of the Lawgiver (God) concerning the pronunciation of this Name: we see that it must fall under one of the five categories of the law, namely the obligatory (*wujūb*), the recommended (*nadb*), the permitted (*ibāha*), the strongly discouraged (*karāha*), and the forbidden (*hurma*) for there exists no question pertaining to the words or actions that does not fall within one of these categories. Thus, before opposing the utterance of this name, one should decide under which category such an act falls. If we find that it is something forbidden or strongly discouraged then we are obliged to oppose whoever does it, for he has committed something worthy of reproach. If, on the other hand, it does not fall into either of these categories, then to reproach it is unjust, for the person concerned has uttered something permissible, even if it is not obligatory or recommended and even if it falls just within the bounds of the lawful. What is to prevent us from repeating something lawful, and how can you make the one who does so deserve reproach or punishment through stripping this name of all religious significance? However we think of this, we cannot classify it among the strongly discouraged or forbidden things, and it retains its value in accordance with its divine station.

You are the type who restricts himself to the levels that suit him; and who so honors that which is sacred to God has done well in the eyes of his Lord; "and who so honors the commandments of God has acted out of devotion of heart."[1] All that we have thus far set forth has been done for the sake of determining that the Name is unique, and without association to anything, be it even by way of implication. If we search for the truth, stripping it of its

[1] Koran 22:30, 32.

veils, we can see that its mention is permitted even for a grammarian, for it is in reality a noun in the vocative[2] which is classified as a complete sentence because it has a vocative particle meaning "I call." It is permissible and even common to omit this particle in Arabic. In fact very often the position of the words makes it necessary to do this—as for example in the case we are speaking of—because of the demands of Koranic knowledge and Islamic learning which are perhaps greater among the Sufi masters than among others.

. . . In addition to all that we have said previously . . . there is the fact that those who invoke thus obey the words of God: "Say: Invoke *Allāh*, or invoke the All-Merciful. However ye call upon Him, His are the most beautiful Names."[3] They have thus concentrated upon the first form of invocation ordered by Him. This is our saying *Allāh*. Through their single-minded effort and their total absorption in the solitary invocation of God "standing, sitting, and lying on their sides,"[4] and through their perseverance in the commanded invocation, the triumph of the divine in them compels them to drop the vocative particle, for the latter is used for one who is far, not for Him who is "nearer to us than our jugular vein."[5] There are verses from the Book of God which prove the truth of the inspiration of those who invoke thus. Invocations are of two types: those from the servant to his Lord, and those from God to His servant. There are examples of the first type where the vocative particle has been dropped, and of the second where it has been kept. . . .

God has clearly set forth the supplications of the servant as follows: "Our Lord, do not take us to task if we forget or err. Our Lord, do not make us bear a burden as you did those who came before us," etc.[6] So you see may God have mercy on you—that the invocations by the servant omit the vocative *yā* for the reasons set forth above. If you have understood this, then tell me, by your Lord: If we hear the people omitting the vocative *yā* in their invocations

[2] An example of this is the opposition by some people to those who draw out the final *h* of the word *Allāh*, saying that here the *h* is interrogative, but an interrogation can only exist in complete sentences. Here it has been introduced into a single word, and thus it constitutes a vocative. Ibn Mālik in his *Khulāsa* said: "The vocative has a remote object (signified by) *Yā* and *Ay* and *Aa*, and by *Ayyā* and *Hayyā*." Even if we assume it (the divine name) to be a sentence, no one could object to saying that the implication here is "O God, have mercy on us and forgive us" and the like.

[3] Koran 17:110.

[4] Koran 4:103.

[5] Koran 50:16.

[6] Koran 2:286.

and prayers to their Lord, are they still to be reproached? And do they do this because of their understanding of their religion, or because of their complete ignorance thereof?

Given all of our attempts to prove our point, I am yet aware that the opponent, or let us say the one who is searching for the correct answer, will continue to scrutinize the texts and proofs of the other side indicating the legality of invoking the Name alone and showing this practice to come from that of the earliest believers. . . . The strongest basis you have for this disagreement is the grammatical argument that the Name is not structured speech. We have shown the falseness of this statement by the proofs in this section; even if there were more texts in your possession concerning this, you should at least not be so quick to reject what people may have as arguments. Finally, whether each side is given an equal voice or not, the matter remains within the realm of *ijtihād*.[7] Thus, the statement of the opponent to the effect that the invocation of this Name in isolation is not permissible proves nothing to those who say the opposite. The crux of the matter is that your assertion of illegality is restricted to what concerns you in particular; but legislating and compelling others to do things is the prerogative of the Infallible, and no one else can say of his own accord, "this is permitted" or "this is not." Whoever does so should lower his voice where his ignorance of the subject exceeds his knowledge. This is a principle that holds for all other disputes, for the Sufi, like others, is obliged to bow his head and to refrain from holding other opinions in the face of the noble Law and the holy Book.

It is certainly possible that the opponent will attack us from another quarter, saying that we have no right to worship and seek reward for the practice that we do not know for certain the earliest Muslims performed. To this we would reply, yes, this is as you say. I hope for the sake of God that we are at least in unison on this point. However, I believe you will not forget, brother, and take note that it is in fact permissible to recite the divine Names and this is proven by the words of the Mighty and Powerful: "To God belong the most beautiful Names, so invoke Him by them."[8] They are single words, and although they are thus, neither this verse nor any other have stipulated as to how the invocation should be pronounced—that is, what form it should take, and so on. This, I believe, is simply out of consideration for the levels of those who are pious and on the path of God, for they will vary in strength

[7] Lit. "striving." The exercise of reason by an individual or group in order to form an opinion about a point not explicitly laid down in the Koran or *hadīth*.

[8] Koran 7:180.

and weakness, desire and awe, passion and yearning. People are at different levels and there are degrees of desire for God; and the innermost depths of men are known from the standpoint of their relationship with Him, Mighty and Glorious. From this we see that there were no restrictions concerning the forms of prayers and invocations among the earliest believers that could cause us to conclude that the Name was definitely not used as a form of invocation among them, or that they did not consider this Name as a form of invocation. For we do not know with certainty all that they uttered in their seclusion or in the world, or in times of illness or health. It is impossible for us to believe that the companions of the Prophet (may God be pleased with them!) did not repeat the Name of God, *Allāh*, *Allāh*, for He has protected them from such a possibility. Here I would like to put before you evidence which will decide the argument, and you may see then that this question has a wider import than you imagined. Muslim, in his *Sahīh*, related on the authority of Abū Hurayrah (may God be pleased with him!) that the latter once saw a sick man groaning in the presence of the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him!). One of the companions told him to cease his groaning and exhorted him to be patient. The Prophet then said (peace and blessings of God be upon him!), "Let him groan, for he is invoking one of the Names of God most high." Al-Bukhārī and Tīrmidhī also had on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet said, "Let him groan, for the groan is one of the Names of God which brings relief to the ill."[9] Then—God have mercy on you—what would you do in such a situation if the sick man was pronouncing the Name of Majesty—*Allāh*, *Allāh*—instead of saying "ah!, ah!"? Would it be correct for this companion to forbid him this? Certainly not, for the exaltedness of the Name clearly precludes this possibility. The companion was reproached only because of his failure to understand the meaning of the word "ah," for it is one of the Names of God most high—and the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him!) acknowledged that it is a form of invocation as such, apart from its being classified as a Name of God. This is undoubtedly a valuable lesson which should make men think well of those who invoke, however they do so. But even supposing you are not convinced that what we have presented to you as a logical argument is sound, yet justice permits one only to say that the question is one about which we must remain in disagreement. However sure its conclusion may seem to us by this argument, it remains

[9] At the time this *hadīth* was written down they ascribed the wrong source to it. The truth is that al-Rafii Imām al-Dīn related it in his *Tārīkh al-Qarawīn* on the authority of 'Aishā' and al-'Azīz confirmed its reliability.

a question of *ijtihād* and thus, how can you try to compel us, brother, to agree with your argument or submit to your *ijtihād* when we compel you to nothing of the sort? All this is one thing, and what is more, however much you assail your brethren the ʿAlawites with reproaches, you cannot prevent them from following the way of those who invoke the Name alone, or from advocating this invocation for the leaders and guides of religion.

. . . In his *Sharh al-Mubāhith al-Asliyya*, Ibn ʿAjība[10] (may God have mercy on him!) relates that Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (may God be pleased with him!) said: "At first I desired to travel upon the path with many prayers, litanies, and fasts. Then when God saw the sincerity of my intention, He brought me to one of His saints who said to me: 'My son, rid yourself of all preoccupations save God alone. Withdraw into isolation, gather together all your strength and fervor, and say *Allāh*, *Allāh*, *Allāh*.'" And al-Ghazālī in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār* said: "As long as you occupy yourself with that which is other than God, you must remain with the negation, *lā ilāha*.[11] When you have become oblivious to all of creation by your contemplation of the Creator, then you have left the negation behind and attained the affirmation: 'Say *Allāh*! Then leave them to their vain talk.'[12]" He also said: "When you have left behind the remembrance of what never was, and devoted yourself to the remembrance of He who has never ceased to be, then when you say *Allāh* you will be delivered from all that is other than God." He also said, "Open the door of your heart with the key of the saying *lā ilāha illa Allāh*, the door of your spirit with the word *Allāh*, and invoke the presence of your innermost essence (*sirr*) with the word *Huwa*, *Huwa*.[13]". . .

Let us assume that the divine Law contains no indication whatsoever as to whether the repetition of the Name is permitted or not. If this is the case, then there is nothing at all to cause one to prohibit its repetition by the tongue, or its passage to the heart. In fact, it appears that there is nothing in the law to forbid the repetition of any name related by tradition and if this is so, then how can pronouncing one of the divine Names be prohibited? Far be it from the divine Law to contain such excesses and deviation and oblige the believer not to repeat the name of his Lord—not to say *Allāh*, *Allāh*, or what is the same, not to repeat any of the rest of God's Names, for He said:

[10] d. 1809.

[11] The two parts of the first Shahādah, or testimony of faith, are *lā ilāha*, "there is no god," *illa Allāh*, "save God."

[12] Koran 6:91.

[13] "He," the Name of the Divine Essence.

"To God belong the most beautiful Names, so call upon Him by them"[14] meaning petition Him by them and invoke Him by them. This is what we have understood and chosen for ourselves. You in turn have the right to choose for yourselves, but you should not oblige us to agree with your choice while we have not obliged you to agree with ours. I will end this section by quoting a passage that contains conclusive proof about the matter. I say this assuming the modesty and generosity of those who claim that this Name is in the category of strongly discouraged things. I ask forgiveness of God! The question of the strongly discouraged (*karāha*) or permitted (*nadab*) category of the word has been resolved, and it was stipulated that it ranks above the merely "permissible." Concerning this, al-Ajhuri, in his *Sharh* of Khalīl mentions the following on the authority of al-Mawwaq: "If there is a disagreement as to whether something is 'permitted' or 'strongly discouraged,' it is better to do it than not to. In the same way, if there is disagreement as to whether an action is part of the *Sunna*, or strongly discouraged, then it cannot be less than 'permitted' in any case."

. . . You also mentioned, or let us say objected, to the fact that they repeatedly utter the Name of Majesty whether or not it is appropriate to do so. They behave thus in the street and other such places. It appears to you that this attitude is lacking in reverence for the divine Names, and that this practice was never specifically ordered by the law. When one of them knocks on the door, he says *Allāh*, when someone calls to him he says *Allāh*, and other things of this kind, all of which you find inappropriate. Here I must add that however indulgent I am in my answer I am yet compelled, after asking your leave, to say that you have neglected to reveal the *hadīth*s relevant to our case which have given you cause to reproach the 'Alawites for having done something wrong. For, if you had indeed read about such traditions you would not have tried to oppose us on the basis of suspicions that the earliest believers practiced differently. If you were able to find texts which corroborate what we have said, I am certain that you would have scrutinized them and pondered them in your heart, submitting to what they say, and placing them above your own opinion. This is only proper and fitting for someone in your position. Thus, here I will quote what should be sufficient, God-willing, to show that in the practice of the 'Alawites free, spontaneous invocation is not outside the realm of the *Sunna*; nor is it in conflict with it. We have concluded that it is the essence of the *Sunna*, and we base this belief on the command to "practice the invocation." This must indicate that

[14] Koran 7:180.

it is not to be restricted to a certain time or place, but can be practiced at all times and in all places. At each instant, man must build upon his moments of remembrance and rid himself of his inherent forgetfulness so that the former gains strength in his mind and remains fixed in his consciousness. In other words, the remembrance of God is praiseworthy whatever the circumstances, just as forgetfulness is blameworthy whatever the circumstances. Certainly the best course for both of us is to seek direction from the Holy Book and the *Sunna*. The passages which the Koran contains about the importance of the invocation and its warnings about being forgetful probably do not need to be quoted for clarification, especially to such as you. The *Sunna*, in turn, contains passages which are no less clear, but it will not hurt for us to quote a few of these *hadīth*s, along with some practices established by the four schools of law, so that we know the will of the Lawgiver concerning us, and can act according to it, God-willing. Ibn Durays and Abu Yala[15] related on the authority of Abu Said al-Khudri: "It is incumbent upon you to fear God as much as possible, and to mention His Name at every tree and stone." The most important idea here is the generalization of time and place with reference to the practice of the invocation. . . . Nawawi relates something similar in his commentary on Muslim, the gist of which is that the Prophet (upon him be blessing and peace!) constantly practiced the invocation, regardless of circumstance or place. Anyone who researches legal opinions of scholars on this subject will find ample evidence indicating unanimous consensus in favor of this invocation. The Hanafi masters have related according to the *Nujūm al-Muhtadīn*, that the Qādī Khan said: "The invocation of God, as well as irreligious and dispersive gathering are permitted in the market place provided that the one in the first activity is preoccupied with glorifying and declaring the oneness of God, and the others are preoccupied with their worldly affairs." If you ponder—God have mercy on you!—the words "dispersive and irreligious gatherings" you will find that the ʿAlawites are not so negligent as to belong to that category. In fact, the invocation has even been permitted in the hot baths, the place where one's private parts are uncovered and one cleanses oneself of filth. This is shown in a large number of texts such as: "Reciting the Koran out loud while in the bath is disliked, but it is not disliked to do so in a whisper, just as one can glorify God and pronounce the testimony of unity there, even in a loud voice." . . . If the invocation is permissible in the bath, what is the sin if the ʿAlawites invoke in the street, for example? Given that a person unaccustomed to hearing someone invoke

[15] d. 1131.

in such places may be repulsed by it, it is nonetheless incumbent upon the impartial man, if he wishes to judge others, to do so according to the justice of God and His prophets and not according to what he would choose or approve, by himself. He should act without fear of the man who approves of one thing and disapproves of all other possibilities. For this reason, we must not be concerned with what a few have approved of, but should limit ourselves to choosing one of the possibilities contained in the religious law. The duty, then, for all who believe in God and the Last Day, is to look no further than these texts, and to act in accordance with their commands by choosing for their soul what God chooses for it. "When God and His Messenger ordain something for the believer, whether man or woman, it is not proper for him to choose for himself in the matter."[16]

. . . In drawing upon all these texts my purpose is not to favor the legal schools which either permit the invocation in the toilet or otherwise, but in order to demonstrate, brother, that some religious leaders have approved of the invocation even in the place considered to be the worst and most unclean by far. Thus if you happen to find someone invoking God while in such a place, do not consider it strange, or look upon him as an innovator, for al-Shāfi'ī and Mālik have stated it to be permitted, and they are sufficiently good examples of those who hold fast to the bond with God and to the *Sunna* of His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him!). This and other texts clearly declare without a doubt that the 'Alawites were wronged by your accusations for they have not gone, through imprudence, to the extreme limits of what is permitted. You have not heard any one of them say that he did not refrain from invocation even in the toilet or in other such unclean circumstances. The most that one can relate of the 'Alawites is that if someone calls to one of them he says *Allāh* and if he calls out to someone he says *Allāh*, and so on. Someone may say that the Names of God are too exalted to be used as a means of gaining access to anything outside of the realm of the afterlife, nor should it be permitted to use them as a means of calling upon someone or attracting his attention. This would be correct, were it not for the fact that this same thing is permitted and even commanded in the religious law. If you were to look in the most obvious area for material which corroborates these arguments, you would find that what God wills of us in this matter is so clear that it comes close to being an order from Him. For example, just consider the call to prayer. As I am sure you know, it has been established as a means of declaring that the times of prayer have come, and as an exhortation

[16] Koran 33:36.

to all to fulfill their duty of prayer. It would be more precise and fitting, perhaps, to call out "the time of prayer has come" or "the time for prayer has commenced," or something that indicates the same thing. Why, in that case, is the whole testimony of faith recited and not simply a few words summarizing it? Furthermore, would you have asked why these Names of God have come to be used as instruments to call men to prayer? A similar example is saying "Glory be to God!" to inform the leader in prayer of a mistake, or to inform him of whatever necessity demands. It is said that the companions of the Prophet (may God be pleased with them!) used to awaken each other by the saying, "God is most great!" This is confirmed in both *Sahīh* collections in the story of the valley, where they slept past the time for the dawn prayer, and the first to awaken was Abū Bakr. ʿUmar was the fourth one to awake, and he began calling out "God is most great!" until the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him!) awoke. Consider—may God have mercy on you!—how they used forms of invocation to awaken one another from sleep. This was how they acted in time of war or otherwise—indicating things by saying "God is most great!"

. . . Before we end this letter that, God-willing, contains blessings for you and for us, I would like to relate some *hadīth*s on this subject. I hope that you will give them the attention they deserve, as is your custom. There are two *hadīth*s which contain the essence of all we have said about the duty of devoting oneself to the remembrance of God, Mighty and Glorious, at every time and place and of filling up every moment with this remembrance. The first is related by Imam Ahmād, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Abi al-Dunya, Nasai and Ibn Habban. In Abū Dāwūd's words: "The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him!) said, 'Whoever sits in a place and does not invoke God there, his sitting is vain and frivolous in the eyes God.'" There Hafīz Abd al-ʿAzīm said the word *al-tira*, pronounced with a short *i* and a single *r*, means a fault and something which God counts against a person. The second *hadīth* comes from Abū Dāwūd and al-Hakīm, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah (may God be pleased with him!). He said: "No one will arise from a group in conversation where God has not been mentioned except they will be like the corpses of donkeys, and will lament their deed on the Day of Judgment."

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