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TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



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Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto
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ON ADDING TO THE NAMES: THE CAMEL'S SMILE

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University of Otago

Like many others, I got my start in Islamic studies sitting in Kaj Öhrnberg's class. Thinking back, one moment in particular stands out. Kaj told us about the ninety-nine beautiful names of God, plus the one-hundredth, which – so tradition has it – only the camel knows: “And that”, Kaj finished his lecture on the subject, “is why the camel smiles”. I was always left to wonder about that smile. But what stuck with me was the issue of the divine names. I ended up translating into Finnish Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (1056–1111) treatise explicating the meanings of the names contained in Abū Hurayra's canonical list and writing a couple of articles based on the same work.¹ Al-Ghazālī in his *Highest goal in explaining the meaning of God's beautiful names* (*Al-maḥṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma'ānī asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*) makes no mention of the camel; but in the third and final part of the treatise he does talk about why the list of canonical names stops just short of a hundred and whether it might conceivably be added to. I know of no prior study that would cover this material, and so I am pleased to offer this study as a small token of my gratitude to Kaj, to whom so many owe so much.

THE DIVINE NAMES: AN OVERVIEW

In order to situate the question of whether the divine names can be added to it is necessary first of all to get clear on the overall shape of al-Ghazālī's project. In its background lies not only the murky debate between the Mu'tazilite and Ash'arite theological factions about whether the divine attributes are real and distinct entities,² but also the notion that had by al-Ghazālī's time become common currency in Muslim spirituality: that we should strive to imitate the divine attributes to the best of our ability. For al-Ghazālī, an enhanced understanding of the meaning of the divine names can serve to facilitate the emulation of the atten-

1 See al-Ghazālī, *Jumalan 99 kaunistava nimeä*; Kukkonen 2010; Kukkonen 2011a.

2 See Wolfson 1976: 112–234.

dant modes of divine perfection. The divine names, when rightly understood in terms of the attributes from which they are derived and to which they refer, exert a powerful attraction over our souls, so that the task of pondering their meaning is no mere theoretical exercise but instead stands at the very heart of the programme of moral improvement that al-Ghazālī envisions as the starting point for his revived religious sciences.³ This is the meaning with which al-Ghazālī imbues the Prophetic tradition that gives his investigation its impetus: “God has ninety-nine names, one less than a hundred; being odd (*witr*), He loves the odd. And whosoever enumerates the [names] enters Paradise.”⁴

In fact, I would be so bold as to suggest that the treatise on the *Beautiful names* provides a vital supplement to al-Ghazālī’s major work, the *Revival of the religious sciences* (*Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*). Whereas the latter work freely roams the landscape of Muslim spirituality and religious observance, the treatise on the *Beautiful names* hones more narrowly on a set of theological virtues at once more encompassing in their scope and at the same time less exhaustive in their treatment. Because al-Ghazālī in the *Beautiful names* is not behold to a pre-existing network of representations when it comes to the praiseworthy character traits, the way he is in the *Revival*,⁵ he is freer to wed his ethical ruminations to the theological framework which so clearly fascinates him – the notion that divine knowledge and power work hand in hand at all levels of reality to produce a world the likes of which can be found neither in reality nor in the worlds of possibility.⁶ I submit that the *Beautiful names* presents, in a necessarily compressed and incomplete form, as revealing a glimpse into the hidden unity of the ‘ilm al-mukāshafa (‘the science of unveiling’) and the ‘ilm al-mu’āmalā (‘the science of practice’) as we are likely to get within al-Ghazālī’s public authorship.⁷

3 al-Ghazālī, *Al-maqṣad al-asnā fi sharḥ ma’ānī asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*: 43ff. There is as yet no satisfactory study of how one’s meditation upon, and imitation of, the divine names relates to al-Ghazālī’s famous “science of the path of the afterlife” (‘ilm al-ṭarīqa al-ākhirā), especially its practical part (‘ilm al-mu’āmalā); nor do we have a proper account of how, e.g. Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī’s (d. 1072) exposition of the divine names compares with al-Ghazālī’s in this regard.

4 al-Ghazālī (*al-Maqṣad*: 63,5–6) cites this on Abū Hurayra’s authority; the *ḥadīth* is found in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* XXXV.2 (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* n. 6476). The traditional way to interpret God being “odd” is to point out that He has no companion, which is to say that God is not paired off with anybody or anything: al-Ghazālī finds *al-Witr* as one of the alternative names of God in another list transmitted on the authority of Abū Hurayra (al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 181.7).

5 See Sherif 1975: 105–160.

6 See Ormsby 1984; Frank 1992.

7 On the chronological proximity of the *Revival* and the *Beautiful names*, see Treiger 2012: 12. It is telling, I think, that Ibn Ṭufayl (1116–1185) singles out the *Beautiful names* as a publically distributed treatise that nonetheless contains recondite meditations on matters of considerable sensitivity: see Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān*: 17.8–10.

Al-Ghazālī's treatise on the *Beautiful names* comes in three parts. In the first part, in its first chapter, al-Ghazālī offers a Peripatetic theory of signification and semantics that is modelled on equivalent expositions found in Avicenna (I.1). This is motivated by al-Ghazālī's statement that an understanding of the constituent terms of a given proposition necessarily precedes an informed judgement regarding its truthfulness.⁸ Accordingly, one must first understand what names are before one is fit to embark on the difficult road of determining what it is that the names name, the divine names in particular. After some ancillary remarks, the first part concludes with a general exposition of the way in which we are to interpret the famous exhortation to enumerate the divine names and take on the divine qualities (I.4).

In the second and longest part (II.1), which al-Ghazālī himself tags as delivering the main content of the treatise,⁹ the ninety-nine names are counted off, one by one, with the commentary on each name typically falling into two distinct sections: First, al-Ghazālī offers some remarks on how we are to understand each name as it applies to God and second, he offers counsel (*tanbīh*) on the extent to which a human being can aspire to embody the perfection described by the name. Towards the end of al-Ghazālī's exposition this structure is relaxed somewhat, with several names receiving only brief comment. There is also an afterword warning against any misunderstanding of the imitation of the divine names that would postulate either a union (*ittiḥād*) with the Godhead or an inherence (*ḥulūl*) of the divine traits in a human being. Then the third and final part addresses the question of whether other names might be allowable besides the ninety-nine enumerated within its own pages.

All in all, the question of adding to the names takes on almost the appearance of an afterthought. In actual fact, it is anything but. Al-Ghazālī himself indicates that the third part "completes" and "perfects" his treatment of the divine names, at the same time that it contributes to the fulfilment of its "goals" and "aims".¹⁰ While the significance of these designations may not be immediately clear, it is at least not hard to see why the prospect of adding to the names or changing their content poses a threat to al-Ghazālī's project. For surely, it would have serious

8 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 17.17–18.3.

9 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 13.6.

10 *maqāṣid wa-ghāyāt*: al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 13.4–5. The statement about the third part completing and perfecting the treatise on the *Beautiful names* is best understood in light of the theory of science prevalent in scientific and philosophical circles during al-Ghazālī's lifetime. According to this conception of science, coverage of ancillary and supplemental topics completes and perfects a science inasmuch as it ensures that no stone is left unturned with respect to a discipline's implications and entailments.

consequences for al-Ghazālī's entire enterprise if the list of names from which he himself has drawn so liberally would turn out to be a contingent one or, what is worse, erroneously put together. What sense is there in devoting one's attentions and pious aspirations to a set of names if there is reason to suspect that it might not even be the right one?

In fact, al-Ghazālī approaches what is essentially the same problem no fewer than three times, although each time only obliquely. In the first part, in two chapters that interrupt the flow of the overall argument, al-Ghazālī pauses to question whether some of the canonical names might be synonyms, having the same meaning and thus referring to one and the same thing (I.2), or whether conversely a polyvalence of meaning might be possible in the case of names which – based on their everyday usage – appear to have multiple connotations (I.3). Al-Ghazālī answers both questions in the negative: no two names among Abū Hurayra's ninety-nine can be allowed to reduce to one another, nor is there room for genuine polysemy. The most that al-Ghazālī is willing to countenance is that when teasing out the implications of a particular name in a given context, one may choose to emphasize different aspects of a name's overall semantic range. The principal message is one that al-Ghazālī is careful to convey across the board in the *Beautiful names*: as long as we trust to the basic soundness of the Prophetic tradition according to which the Messenger of God spoke of ninety-nine names and pointed to ninety-nine as guaranteeing otherworldly felicity, it is to the ninety-nine that we should turn, neither more nor less.¹¹

A variant on the same problem resurfaces at the end of the second part, where al-Ghazālī attaches two short chapters dedicated to reductionist interpretations of the attributes. First there is the model that seeks to reduce all of the divine names to seven essential attributes (II.2); given how al-Ghazālī's own *Mean in belief* (*al-Iqtīṣād fī al-ī'tiqād*) refers to the names as being derived (*mushtaqq*) from the attributes,¹² we can see how this would be a touchy issue for him. A more radical thesis, which al-Ghazālī attributes to the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers, is that all the divine attributes reduce to the single attribute of divine knowledge, which in turn is commensurate with the divine essence (II.3). In the present context al-Ghazālī is content merely to gesture at what his own position on the issue might be; he says that the treatise on the *Beautiful names* is not the appropriate context in which to counter the errors of the Mu'tazilites and the philosophers. Al-Ghazālī points to his own *Incoherence of the Philosophers* for a fuller refutation, to which we may add two chapters in the *Mean in belief* dedicated to establishing

¹¹ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maṣṣad*: 36–41.

¹² See al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād fī al-ī'tiqād*: 157.

the reality of the attributes. In both works al-Ghazālī focuses on the absurdity stemming from a denial of the attributes rather than on the positive work that affirming their reality can do.¹³ A comparison between the *Beautiful names* and the *Mean in belief* reveals that for al-Ghazālī the point in grouping certain names and/or attributes together is not to advocate a reductionism of any sort. Rather, certain groupings of attributes disclose to the sharp-eyed observer ten or so different ways in which God can relate either to Himself or to His creation.¹⁴

As for al-Ghazālī's own theory concerning the divine names and the attributes to which they refer, this can be presented in brief terms as follows. According to al-Ghazālī, while we do name individuals, too, in the courses of our ordinary lives, it is our ability to coin common names – in a word, nouns – that is our standout feature as rational beings, because this is what helps us to identify and to communicate the universal features of reality. This naming process in turn is dependent upon the psychological mechanisms whereby our souls first receive the impressions (*āthār*) of things: we perceive the sun's heat and its round shape, and to these perceptions we give the words "hot" and "round", while the external objects themselves are named by us only indirectly.¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī can at this point avail himself of the Avicennian doctrine of intentions (*ma'nā*, pl. *ma'ānī*). While our expressions refer primarily to what we mean by them, that is to say, to the intentions we have in our mind, it is still the case that certain underlying realities and real common features undergird these impressions, since the universals *in rebus* predate their existence in the soul and are in some sense isomorphic with them.¹⁶

All this, however, appears to create an insurmountable gap between us and the language we use when it comes to God. Our experience, after all, is only ever of the mundane world, which means that we never know entirely what it is we mean when we say, for example, that God is the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) or that He is the Giver of Gifts (*al-Wahbāb*). How can we then feel confident that we are in fact naming something when we call God by these names? Al-Ghazālī's answer

13 al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*: 96–109 (a discussion whose purpose is strictly dialectical: al-Ghazālī endeavours to show how the strategy by which the philosophers arrive at a denial of the real attribute of knowledge leads to imputing ignorance to the Godhead); in a more positive vein, al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*: 129–141.

14 Cf. al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 172–174 with al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*: 157–158; on al-Ghazālī and the relationship of divine knowledge with the attributes, Kukkonen 2011a: 669–670.

15 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 19.2 and 35.5–6; for al-Ghazālī's semantics, Kukkonen 2010; Gätje 1971.

16 Intentions, that is to say, enjoy a subjective (= external) as well as objective existence (= being an object of thought): for a reasonably clear explication of this doctrine that also takes into account the pre-existence of things in the divine mind see al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*: 3:19.30–20.7.

is that it is the God-given origin of the authoritative list of divine names that allows us to rest easy in the knowledge that we are in fact addressing God in the appropriate manner.¹⁷ It may well be that our understanding fails us when trying to comprehend what is truly meant by a given name in the context of the divine. For instance, God’s exalted nature – the fact that God is “most high” (*al-‘Alī*) – will all too easily be translated into mere spatial terms, as the Ḥashwiyya insist on doing.¹⁸ But because we have been instructed by God to address Him by the name “most high” (this is the notion of *tawqīf*), this remains a form of address that is safe to use. Meaning may be added to the words later, as we advance in our knowledge of God and our own spiritual perfection.¹⁹

ADDITIONAL NAMES

But if this is so – if our licence to call God by some particular name only ever derives from direct divine authorization to do so – then the suggestion appears all the more damaging that the list of ninety-nine names might somehow be contingent, humanly derived, or wrongly constituted. What makes the matter worse from al-Ghazālī’s perspective is that the evidence for such an imputation is far too strong to dismiss; it is hence in the last part of the treatise that he confronts the charges head-on.

In the first instance, another version of Abū Hurayra’s authoritative list was in circulation. In this version, the name “the Only” (*al-Wāḥid*) was replaced by its near-synonym “the One” (*al-Aḥad*) and “the Dominator” (*al-Qaḥḥār*) by “the Conqueror” (*al-Qāḥir*), while other substitutions included different names entirely, of the likes of “the One Who Suffices” (*al-Kāfi*), “the Beautiful” (*al-Jamīl*), and “the Eternal” (*al-Qadīm*).²⁰ Second, both the Qur’ān and the Prophetic traditions mention epithets that appear to deserve the status of names

17 The only mention of the divine names in the early *kalām* work, *The Mean in belief*, makes precisely the point that it is God Himself who calls Himself by certain names: al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*: 157.

18 For a brief discussion of how in al-Ghazālī the faculty of estimation (*wahm*) automatically comes up with estimative judgements concerning things and how this psychophysically grounded process may lead one’s theological reasoning astray, see Griffel 2012 (and for the all-important Avicennian background Black 1993); cf. also Kukkonen forthcoming.

19 See al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 55–59; for comments, see Kukkonen 2010: 72–74.

20 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 181.3–9. Al-Ghazālī’s mention of the epithets of beauty and eternity is significant for the reason that both of these could be construed as being metalevel attributes, that is, structuring principles for the divine attributes themselves; see Kukkonen 2011b: 100 and Wisnovsky 2004 for comments on beauty and eternity, respectively. It is therefore perhaps fortuitous – and not entirely coincidental – that Abū Hurayra’s alternative list is not the one from which al-Ghazālī works.

just as much as the ones found in Abū Hurayra's list. And if the practice of deriving names from actions is sanctioned, as the Qur'ān's frequent use of the active participle form appears to intimate, then a whole host more can be added on top of these. (In fact, in the latter case the names will escape all measure, given that God's actions themselves are unfathomable.)²¹ Third, several criticisms could be lobbied at Abū Hurayra's work on account of there being certifiable weak links in the chain of transmission (*musnad*) and because several well-attested names, like the mysterious *Ramaḍān*, do not appear in it.²²

Before entering into an analysis of how al-Ghazālī tackles these questions it is best to acknowledge upfront that his exposition is uncharacteristically muddled and muddied and infuriatingly inconclusive. Al-Ghazālī hems, haws, and veers wildly from one position to its opposite while tentatively embracing each opposite pole in turn; in general, he appears genuinely at a loss as to what he actually means to say. Primarily this is because some of the conclusions he eventually reaches are ones that he should by all rights find highly embarrassing. The list of names from which al-Ghazālī has been working all along proves by his own admission unlikely to be the correct one, nor does he offer much reason to think that a single insight or perspective would solve all of the accumulated problems at a stroke and resolve all the differences in opinion. Certainly, if the matter is to be resolved empirically, through the verification of *aḥādīth* and sifting of scriptural detail, then that task has hardly been engaged: Ibn Ḥazm's (994–1064) name is mentioned in this connexion, but no further details are given that would indicate how closely al-Ghazālī read the Andalusian thinker.²³ All of which is to say that al-Ghazālī's treatment of the problem of adding to the names is inconclusive for the very good reason that he does not himself believe that the matter *has* been concluded; there is insufficient evidence either way, regardless of whether one chooses to pursue the path of rational enquiry or more empirical studies. This interpretation is borne out by the wording that al-Ghazālī employs when closing off his discussion of the issue:

This is what occurred to me regarding the [different] readings of this *ḥadīth*. We did not engage with most of the attendant issues, since these are matters of personal judgement (*ijtihādāt*) which cannot be known without conjecture (*takmīn*); they therefore fall outside the purity of intellects. God knows best.²⁴

21 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 181.10–182.5.

22 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 189.7–190.5.

23 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 190.6–191.3; al-Ghazālī's own reputation as a decidedly undisciplined student of *aḥādīth* bears remembering here.

24 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 191.4–6.

Notice the implicit assumption: if a pure intellectual determination could be made, then a decisive judgement would be passed and the gate of independent judgement would slam shut. But decisiveness is just not on the agenda, rather, conjecture remains the order of the day. As a consequence, there will also necessarily remain a degree of fuzziness when it comes to enumerating the names.

Al-Ghazālī does, however, make a number of general observations regarding the central problem of whether there are ninety-nine names or more, and we would do well to record some of them. In favour of expanding the repertory of names, al-Ghazālī observes first that scholars commonly identify other names besides Abū Hurayra’s in the authoritative texts, and that at any rate all the names used of God in the various holy traditions, when put together, certainly exceed the number ninety-nine. The fact that God is said to have kept some names to Himself similarly points in the direction of there being names other than the ninety-nine most often cited.²⁵

Then again: why would tradition speak of God having ninety-nine names if He in fact has many more? This would seem to make a mockery of the plain sense of God’s word, something al-Ghazālī warns against repeatedly.²⁶ Neither will it do simply to say that whosoever possesses, say, a thousand units of something thereby will come to possess ninety-nine as well, and that thanks to this the claim about God having ninety-nine names will also turn out to be true. That would merely be a feint:

[Suppose that] somebody has a thousand dirhams: surely it is inconceivable that anyone in their right mind would say that the person in question has ninety-nine dirhams, at least [if this were said] solely on the basis of a thousand encompassing that [number] as well. Rather, if in mentioning a thing some number is specified, one is led thereby to understand that there are no further [things] beyond those numbered.²⁷

Accordingly, if it is said that God has ninety-nine names, then surely this serves some specific purpose and conveys something more than merely a trivial truth. (One might even argue that such a way of presenting the truth is profoundly misleading. Suppose that in the course of haggling over the price of an item the buyer says, “Well, I have 99 dirhams in my pocket.” If in fact the buyer has in that same pocket a thousand dirhams – a sum that by definition includes also

²⁵ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 184.8–11.

²⁶ This is most prominently the case with the *Decisive Criterion between Islam and Covert Apostasy* (*Fayṣal al-tafriqa bayn al-islām wa-l-zandaqa*) and with al-Ghazālī’s many polemical treatises against the Ismāʿīlīs, whom al-Ghazālī charges for taking licence with Scripture.

²⁷ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 184.5–8.

the ninety-nine, rendering the statement materially true – would the claim still not be considered deceitful by rights?) No, the interpretation that comes most naturally is that God has given us the task of reflecting on ninety-nine names, no more and no less, and that ninety-nine are all the names that there are.

Al-Ghazālī next raises the prospect that somebody might defend the Prophetic tradition about God having ninety-nine names on the grounds that this is the number that is needed for some practical purpose, similar to how reference might be made to some king's ninety-nine soldiers, who constitute a formidable enough cadre to repel any attack. According to al-Ghazālī, this line of explanation has an acceptable interpretation as well as an unacceptable one. The interpretation that is to be discarded is that out of some greater sum (say, a thousand names) any ninety-nine could be picked at random, either in order to convey God's majesty or for the purposes of emulation. This suggestion al-Ghazālī rejects because of its seeming arbitrariness. Far likelier according to him is that the number ninety-nine has been evoked because of a specific quality and power attached to some particular set of ninety-nine names. Similar to the king's soldiers, from whose ranks ninety-nine are singled out for their courage and strength, the ninety-nine names of God also rank above all others in some crucial aspect.²⁸ But what?

One may ask why these ninety-nine names have been chosen for this task, given that they are all names of God. To this we say that it is possible for the excellence of the names to differ according to the difference in their meanings when it comes to majesty and nobility. Out of [all] the names, the ninety-nine bring together a set of meanings that announces God's majesty in a way no other [set] manages to combine. It is thus distinguished by an excess of nobility.²⁹

When al-Ghazālī alludes to a set of meanings, this can only be understood to indicate that the ninety-nine names provide a comprehensive account of what there is to know about the various modes of divine perfection. This view, if correct, holds tremendous promise, as comprehensive knowledge about the divine forms of perfection would more or less automatically translate into a corresponding understanding of the way that all created reality unfolds from the Godhead. At the same time, perfect knowledge of the forms of divine perfection would give God's servant (*'abd*, al-Ghazālī's preferred term throughout the *Beautiful names* for the human being) a reliable guide to emulating divinity in all its aspects.

And this really is what al-Ghazālī wants to say, more or less. The ninety-nine revealed names of God hold a special potency both when it comes to spiritual

²⁸ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 186.1–12.

²⁹ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 186.13–17.

improvement and as a key to unlocking the mysteries littered throughout God's works and creation. Yet the fact that we are able to evoke a name without understanding its (divine) significance already safeguards against the notion that a mere mention of the names would automatically propel their speaker (for that is what *dhikr*, the remembrance of God, amounts to in practical terms) into a higher domain. Consistent with the Ash'arite cognitive approach to matters of faith, al-Ghazālī holds that an affirmation of the tongue (*taṣḍīq bi-l-lisān*) will not do; we must affirm with our hearts also.³⁰ More than that – and this is where al-Ghazālī parts company with the Ash'arites – a notional understanding of the meaning of the divine names through the use of discursive reason is only the first step in an exploration of Muslim faith, with subsequent stages revealed to the spiritual aspirant through a combination of strenuous self-discipline and the supererogatory gift of insight (*baṣīra*) afforded by God at His sole discretion and pleasure.³¹ Among other things, the fact that any intimate understanding (*ma'rifa*) of matters divine can only arise as an infusion of divine grace therefore means also that the hidden wisdom in offering precisely ninety-nine names as a pathway for meditation and emulation remains a divine secret, to be divulged to God's elect at His discretion.

We thus circle back to the notion that was evoked already at the beginning of this essay: we are to address our Lord in those terms which He himself has given to us, whether we understand their meaning or not. Al-Ghazālī refers multiple times to the Messenger of God exclaiming, "I cannot praise you adequately: You are as You have praised Yourself", and in the same context makes reference to Abū Bakr's purported apophatic bent.³² All this is meant to bolster our confidence in there being a divine purpose to ninety-nine names being disclosed to us, and a higher truth being reflected in it somehow, even if we do not know what that truth is or how to construe it.

The same basic point is made in one more context, although the muddiness of al-Ghazālī's discussion illustrates better than anything his resistance towards pinning down any very precise doctrine regarding the enumeration of the names. The question this time is why the exact number of ninety-nine should have been evoked. Al-Ghazālī at first appears to reject the notion that there should be some supernatural power invested in the number ninety-nine itself. It is not the case that the divine perfections should measure up to a certain number arrived at a priori, rather, ninety-nine ends up being the figure because that is what the divine

30 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 42.4–16; for the Ash'arite view, see Frank 1989.

31 See Kukkonen 2012.

32 e.g. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*: 1:98.10–13; al-Ghazālī: *al-Maqṣad*: 54.13–20.

perfections amount to once they are enumerated.³³ Immediately after, however, al-Ghazālī circles right back to the notion of “the names being [what they are] by way of an act of naming that is voluntary and by choice”,³⁴ a notion he now appears to endorse after all, since he evokes once more the tradition that says that God loves the odd (*witr*) due to being odd Himself. Then again, right in the middle of this swerve he injects a further crucial qualification: the attributes of nobility (*ṣifāt al-sharḥ*), that is, the seven principal divine attributes recognized by the Sunnis (life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, seeing, speech), are what they are by themselves and not through any act of the will, and consequently the names attached to these attributes are not arbitrarily assigned either.³⁵ It is extremely hard to see what all this adds up to, especially in light of the fact that al-Ghazālī elsewhere appears to deny that there is any relevant distinction to be made between attributes of the essence and descriptive, that is, relational attributes.³⁶ Perhaps the best that we can venture is that al-Ghazālī wants to preserve the datum about the *ḥadīth* referencing God’s love of the odd, but that he has a hard time squaring this with his other intellectual commitments.

THE MOST TREMENDOUS NAME

Interlaced with al-Ghazālī’s discussion about whether it is allowable to hold that there are names in addition to Abū Hurayra’s ninety-nine there runs another query. The question is whether one name might assume pre-eminence over all others. The operative assumption is that this peculiar name would fall outside the commonly recognized ninety-name, or that its pre-eminence at least would not be recognized by everybody. Al-Ghazālī seems to take these traditions surrounding this “most tremendous name” (*al-ism al-a’zam*) seriously. He cites the venerated ancestors (*al-salaf*) as saying that the most tremendous name was given to some (unnamed) individual, and from this draws the conclusion that one would naturally expect such a name to fall outside of the canonical and conventionally revealed ninety-nine.³⁷

Now, according to al-Ghazālī’s own analysis, tremendousness denotes primarily incomprehensibility and unintelligibility, the *tremens* resulting from the

33 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 187.19–188.4.

34 *Bi-l-tasmiya al-irādiyya al-ikhtiyāriyya*: al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 188.7.

35 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 188.7–8.

36 See Kukkonen 2011a: 668, n. 23.

37 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 184.12–14; the tradition goes uncredited but Shehadi in his edition traces it back to Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Musnad*, 1.391 and 1.456. For the tradition of the most tremendous name, see Gimaret 1988: 85–94.

object of apprehension surpassing the limits of the perceiving subject's powers of comprehending. The notion shares a basic affinity with Immanuel Kant's notion of the sublime.³⁸ By these lights, one would have to wonder about whether even a special act of divine disclosure would be capable of rendering this kind of name – by definition, a name more tremendous than all others – intelligible to its recipient. For, as al-Ghazālī has already disclosed in his appendix to Part II, Chapter 1, a true comprehension of any one of the divine attributes (which is to say, the meaning of the divine names), which in itself is an exceedingly rare event, will already result in a fundamental cognitive confusion, one that threatens to impair one's judgement and result in exclamations erroneously trumpeting the essential unity of the believer and God.³⁹ Seemingly, the only way to trump this experience would be to get to enjoy some kind of insight into God's essence (as opposed to the attributes); but this would be an especially inflammatory suggestion, as al-Ghazālī well knows.⁴⁰ Although al-Ghazālī talks in the *Revival* and elsewhere of a concealed affinity between the human soul and its beloved, God, this is most comfortably read in light of his theory of the soul finding its natural goal in the contemplation of the attributes, not the essence.

Consequently, al-Ghazālī does not appear terribly invested in the whole notion of a single name of God that would be hidden in a way that others are not. He admits the possibility that the “most tremendous name”, if such a thing exists, may fall outside of Abū Hurayra's standard list. In that case, al-Ghazālī avers, there are fundamentally different ranks of nobility when it comes to the understanding of the names among the masses (*al-jamāhīr*) and the understanding that belongs to the friends of God and the prophets (*al-awliyā' wa-l-anbiyā'*).⁴¹ Yet in the same breath, al-Ghazālī also iterates how the most tremendous name may also lurk unrecognized among the ones commonly acknowledged. The latter claim goes unsubstantiated and unelaborated except for some intriguing hints, served up in the form of recollections from the prophetic *Sunna*: al-Ghazālī points out that the epithets of unity, mercy, life, and eternity are mentioned in conjunction with exclamations from Muḥammad to the effect that one who evokes them enjoys a special status in the eyes of God.⁴²

Out of these designations, the description of God as “the Living” (*al-Hayy*) perhaps looks to be the odd one out at first sight, given how it does not typically occupy a significant position in *kalām* discussions regarding the divine

38 See the account of epithet “the Tremendous” (*al-'Azīm*); al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 112.17–113.12.

39 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 166.1–168.2.

40 See, e.g. al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*: 17.14–18.19 and for a recent study, see Treiger 2007.

41 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 187.5–8.

42 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 187.8–17.

attributes.⁴³ (Unity, mercy, and eternity all appear more plausible candidates.) But perhaps precisely in light of this it is noticeable how al-Ghazālī in the *Beautiful names* invests the notion of God’s life with fresh content. Put briefly, al-Ghazālī posits that one’s share in life is commensurate with one’s degree of conscious wakefulness and that consequently, God as the being who is most fully aware of all that is is also the one who is most alive.⁴⁴ Now this, obviously, is a notion that the Illuminationist school of philosophy will run with, starting with Suhrawardī; it remains notional in al-Ghazālī and I do not wish to make too much of it, except to point out how it fits both with al-Ghazālī’s emphasis on divine knowledge as a direct and intimate acquaintance with everything, even the most meagre facets of reality, and the need to secure a place for life among the plausible candidates for the “most tremendous name”.

Be that as it may, al-Ghazālī looks to want to bypass the whole idea of God’s hidden or most tremendous name with little fanfare. Whether this is because of the sensitivity of the issue or because al-Ghazālī finds the notion relatively uninteresting, it is hard to tell.

ADDING TO THE NAMES

Thus far we have primarily discussed the issue of whether additional names of God *exist* in addition to the ninety-nine listed in the *Beautiful names*, in the sense that the names announced by God might include hitherto unknown entries. It is another thing, strictly speaking, to ask whether the names might conceivably be added to – that is, added to through deliberate human agency. Can humans coin new names when it comes to God?

As al-Ghazālī reports, opinion among the Ash‘arites on this question was divided. Al-Ash‘arī (d. 935) had judged that in matters where divine instruction (*tawqīf*) is explicit, whatever is not expressly allowed must remain forbidden; al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), by contrast, had taken a liberal stance, saying that what

43 For characteristically, and self-professedly, curt comments in al-Ghazālī’s *kalām* works, see al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*: 100.14–101.3 and al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*: 1:105.8–10. Similar to al-Ghazālī’s treatment in the *Mean in belief*, al-Ghazālī’s teacher al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) in his *Shāmīl* links life intimately to God’s power (*qudra*) and knowledge (*‘ilm*) and derives all three attributes from God’s creative activity: as the Maker (*al-Ṣāni’*), God must be powerful (*qādir*) and knowledgeable (*‘ālim*) about what He makes, both features entailing that He possesses life also. (Al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmīl fī uṣūl al-dīn*: 621–625; likewise al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb uṣūl al-dīn*: 105–106) The same argument is presented in compressed form in the *Irshād* (al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*: 63); when it comes to explaining the meaning of the divine names, al-Juwaynī simply says that there is no secret to what it means to be living (al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*: 153).

44 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maṣṣad*: 142.12–19.

is not expressly forbidden is admissible.⁴⁵ Al-Juwaynī meanwhile, had split the difference, preferring to suspend judgement altogether in the absence of an explicit ruling.⁴⁶

In forging his compromise position, al-Juwaynī had explicitly conflated names (*asmāʾ*) with attributes (*ṣifāt*): in light of his presentation, both are to be treated equivalently. By contrast, when al-Ghazālī in the *Beautiful names* endeavours to present a fresh solution to the problem, this is precisely through driving a wedge between the two – hardly a coincidence, even though al-Ghazālī fails to mention al-Juwaynī by name. According to al-Ghazālī, names are posited (*mawḍūʿ*) in order to name something, and in the case of an individual, this can only be done by someone who possesses legal authority or guardianship (*walī*) over the person, such as a father or a master. Accordingly, divine law prohibits our assigning additional names to Muḥammad, since no-one can presume to stand above God’s Messenger in such a manner. By way of analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) this goes double for God. We are simply not in a position to be addressing God with whatever name we please.⁴⁷ Although the case is presented in terms of guarding against human presumption and a kind of crime against God’s majesty, I think it is safe to say that al-Ghazālī also assumes as background knowledge his earlier discussion of how naming works. To name correctly something is to identify *what* that something is, and in the case of God, such access to the divine quiddity is strictly impossible.⁴⁸

More interesting in some ways is al-Ghazālī’s presentation of the other side of the equation. When it comes to attributes, these are in the end all mere descriptions (*ṣifa* deriving from *waṣf*), and therefore anything that is said truthfully about God is in principle allowable. There are some restrictions: it is only proper that all our talk praise God, so that, for example, calling God “the Humiliator” (*al-Mudhill*) without simultaneously bringing up His ability to lift up (*al-Muʿizz*) is disallowed.⁴⁹ Just as we would not call a person tall or fair-skinned for fear of offending him, so also we will not single out for attention those aspects of divine activity that would appear to belittle Him in any way.⁵⁰

45 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 192.4–8.

46 al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād*: 143.

47 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 193.4–194.4.

48 This is a central tenet of the first part of the *Beautiful names*; see Kukkonen 2010; similarly already al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-tambīd*: 300.

49 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 194.17–195.4; notice that these are actual divine names, discussed in the second part of the *Beautiful names* (al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 95.4–18).

50 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 194.10–12, 195.9–13 (the example of tallness and fairness being undesirable traits may appear puzzling in a Nordic context).

By the same token, out of the many near-synonyms for some of the acknowledged divine names, those are prohibited whose ordinary semantic range includes even a hint of some defect. But here again there is a difference between names and attributes: even if a recognized name shows similar shading, the fact that its use is authorized means that we are simply to disregard any negative connotations that a name may have in our minds, secure in the knowledge that the true interpretation of the name in relation to God has no such meaning.⁵¹ In short, if names name, then attributes merely describe. Therefore all of God's innumerable activities, from His throwing the spear at the Battle of Badr to His sowing the seed that becomes our daily nourishment, can become the basis for attributing to Him some beautiful or majestic quality.⁵²

CONCLUSIONS

The question about the exact number of the divine names receives uneven treatment from al-Ghazālī largely because he feels genuinely torn about it. Based on what he has read from experts in the Prophetic *Sunna* – Aḥmad al-Bayhaqī and Abū 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī are mentioned by name – al-Ghazālī is ready to acknowledge the problematic nature of Abū Hurayra's list; and he knows of several traditions, considered important enough by him, which contain names other than Abū Hurayra's, so that their inclusion would be eminently desirable even at the expense of the integrity of Abū Hurayra's list. At the same time, no superior alternative readily presents itself that would allow for a comprehensive overhaul of the canonical set – at least not one that would carry any greater overall level of conviction than Abu Hurayra's existing collection.

In a way, the simplest solution would be to admit names in excess of the canonical ninety-nine. As al-Ghazālī puts it, "if one were to regard as weak the version in which the number of names [is mentioned], a host of problems would dissipate".⁵³ Provided one is willing to lift the cap that puts the maximum number of acknowledged names at ninety-nine, there need not be any conflict between the various traditions and Qur'ānic pointers; as in Hilbert's Hotel, with its various orders of infinities, space can be found for everything.⁵⁴ However, that avenue is not really open to al-Ghazālī, already due to his systematizing proclivities. Ascribing various attributes to God, as so many descriptions of God's glory

51 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 196.1–9; for an example, see al-Ghazālī's explanation of God's patience, al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 161.17–162.2.

52 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 194.15–195.2, 195.14–19.

53 al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*: 190.4–5.

54 For one vivid description of Hilbert's Hotel see Craig & Smith 1993: 13–14.

and majesty, may be perfectly fine, but having an amorphous mass of divinely sanctioned names militates against al-Ghazālī's preferred picture of the Prophet moving with divine purpose and – ultimately more importantly – of the pursuit of spiritual perfection proceeding along orderly and tightly defined lines.

Al-Ghazālī thus arrives at a somewhat unhappy compromise. The Messenger of God announced ninety-nine names exactly; he deliberately assembled them for the purpose of awakening in people a desire to enumerate them and emulate them; yet somehow the list from which Muḥammad taught got muddled and lost along the way, to the degree that its full recovery seems unlikely or at least requires nearly superhuman effort.⁵⁵ This is not a very satisfactory outcome and it should not surprise us, therefore, to see al-Ghazālī effectively bury it under a flood of verbiage.

One can detect a level of disengagement in the way that al-Ghazālī's exposition of the actual names – those he finds in Abū Hurayra – peters out towards the end of the *Beautiful names*. Al-Ghazālī's enthusiasm for the names clearly wanes towards the end of the second part, and he makes little effort to conceal this. Some of the latter names elicit a wealth of commentary from him when it comes to the hidden depths and divine secrets they contain, while others barely rank high enough to garner his attention. When the divine name “the Pitying” (*al-Ra'ūf*) is waved away in two lines as merely mercy amplified (a curious move to begin with, given the prominent position enjoyed by divine mercy itself in the larger scheme of things);⁵⁶ when the same extremely curt explanation is given to the name “the Most Exalted” (*al-Muta'ālī*) only a few lines later;⁵⁷ and when the explication of several names ends with an abrupt “enough already” after only a few desultory remarks, we may safely assume that al-Ghazālī does not have an equal stake in all the names. Then again, his analysis of several of them in the *Beautiful names* is sufficiently subtle and pregnant with meaning as to remove any doubt that al-Ghazālī believes at least some of the names to be imbued with a special divine potency. Which ones are which, it appears, is left for the reader to decide. It is an unsatisfactory note on which to end, to be sure, but perhaps an honest one. The camel, as ever, remains silent.

⁵⁵ See al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 188.15–191.3.

⁵⁶ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 152.3–4.

⁵⁷ al-Ghazālī, *al-Maḥṣad*: 153.8.

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