

THE STATIONS OF THE RELIGION

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The STATIONS *of the Religion*

*A Description of the Steps of
Spiritual Wayfaring (Sulūk)*

مقامات الدين الثلاث

By

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Publisher's Preface



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

This short book exists in order to present to the Muslim as well as non-Muslim English speaking community, a simple yet concise explanation of the “Deen” or religion called Islam. It is in fact a commentary and explanation of the famous hadith of Jibril², in which the blessed angel

2 Umar ibn al-Khattab said: One day when we were with God’s messenger, a man with very white clothing and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, and none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, he said, “Tell me, Muhammad, about submission.”

He replied, ‘Submission (Islām) means that you should bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God’s messenger, that you should perform the ritual prayer, pay the alms tax, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to go there.’

The man said, “You have spoken the truth.” We were surprised at his questioning him and then declaring that he had spoken the truth. He said “Now tell me about faith.”

He replied, “Faith (Imān) means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and

visited the beloved Prophet ﷺ and his companions. In this visit (where he was disguised as a human-being) he asks the Prophet a series of questions, that he (Prophet Muhammad) correctly answers. At the end of the question and answer session, the Prophet reveals to his companions that the questioner was in-fact the angel Jibril, “who came to teach you your religion (Deen).”

Shaykh Ibrahim, commences in this letter/treatise to elaborate, concisely, on each of the ‘stations’ of the religion that are mentioned in the hadith (Islam, Iman & Ihsan)

This hadith can rightly be described as the foundation with which Muslims should understand their goals and duties. It is in essence a complete description of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

that you have faith in the measuring out (of destiny), both its good and its evil.”

Remarking that he had spoken the truth, he then said, “Now tell me about doing what is beautiful.”

He replied, “Doing what is beautiful (Ihsān) means that you should worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”

Then the man said, “Tell me about the Hour”

The Prophet replied, “About that he who is questioned knows no more than the questioner.”

The man said, “Then tell me about its marks.”

He said, “The slave girl will give birth to her mistress, and you will see the barefoot, the naked, the destitute, and the shepherds vying with each other in building.”

Then the man went away. After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me, “Do you know who the questioner was, ‘Umar?’” I replied, “God and His messenger know best. “He said, “He was Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion. “

(Muslim)

40 Hadith Nawawi (hadith 2)

We hope this book can serve as an instructional reminder for those that seek perfection.

May Allah bless our guides, may he benefit us by them and may we draw closer to Himself and his beloved Messenger. Amin

Ibrahim Ahmed Dimson
PUBLISHER, FAYDA BOOKS

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The Stations of the Religion



Shaykh Ibrāhīm drafted the following letter concerning the “three stations of the religion” (maqāmāt al-dīn al-thalāth) on his farm outside of Kaolack in 1931.² It has since served as a significant public description of the steps of spiritual wayfaring (sulūk).

In the Name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful, and may Allāh’s blessing be upon His noble Prophet Muḥammad, the best of humanity, and upon his companions, the stars (of guidance).

All praise is due to Allāh, the Peace, the Security, the Beneficent, glory be to Him. He is the King, the Forgiving, the Merciful, the Watchful, the Protector.

Peace be upon (Muḥammad) the straight path, the God-conscious one, the pure, the truthful, the sincere, the one molded with tremendous character, the observant, the witness, the source of most perfect gnosis, the servant (‘abd) and the master (sayyid), the one described with the attributes of the Greatest Master. May Allāh’s complete satisfaction be upon the helper of the Truth by the Truth, the guide to the straight path, and on his

² Niasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā’il*, III: 50-55.

people, (may this prayer be) worthy of his merit, and surely his worth is exceedingly great.

I have received your noble letter and greetings of peace, most agreeable beloved and exemplary seeker of (Divine) satisfaction, ʿUmar b. Mālik, may the Sovereign treat both you and your father with kindness. I received your question concerning the three stations of the Religion (*maqāmāt al-dīn*), the abodes that pertain to them, and the reality of these properties. This matter has been discussed with extensive research by the master, the knower of Allāh, ʿUbayda b. Anjūba, in his book *Mizāb (al-raḥma)*.³ But since you did not find what suffices you therein, here is what has been possible for me to write down of my thoughts:

There is nothing worthy of worship but Allāh (*lā ilāha ill-Allāh*). The stations of the Religion are three: submission (*islām*), faith (*īmān*), and excellence (*iḥsān*). *Islām* is the pronouncement of “There is nothing worthy of worship but Allāh.” *Īmān* is to have knowledge of “There is nothing worthy of worship but Allāh.” *Iḥsān* is the course in accordance with “There is nothing worthy of worship but Allāh.” This means that you pronounce the words of a spiritual state, the speech of Allāh, the noble word; which is the word of repentance, the word of God-consciousness, the word of sincerity, the word of Divine Unity, the good word. This (statement) has three degrees. The first degree is the station of *Islām*, which is undertaking the emulation of the wise statement on this lowest plane of material existence (*ḥaḍra al-nāsūt*). The second degree, *Īmān*, is the knowledge of

3 Further discussion of Ibn Anjūba’s discussion of the *Maqāmāt al-dīn* can be found in Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (Oxford UP, 2010), 87-91.

this statement, and the third degree, *Ihsān*, is (being) the speech of Allāh. Thus the three stations can be explained as all revolving around the statement, “There is nothing worthy of worship but Allāh.”

REPENTANCE

As for the “abodes” (*manāzil*), the first abode of Islām is repentance (*tawba*). This means removing oneself from denying blessing. Having gratitude and consideration for every blessing is a means of attaining the satisfaction of the Benefactor, and the opposite of gratitude is disbelief (*kufr*). The Sufi scholars have added that repentance is leaving aside base character traits for sublime character traits. I would add that base character traits for the common people include leaving aside the obligations of the Religion (*farā'id*) and pursuing forbidden things. The baseness of the elite is to leave aside the supererogatory exemplary acts (*faḍā'il*) while pursuing reprehensible things (*makrūhāt*). The baseness of the elite of the elite is the turning away from the Divine Presence (*ḥaḍra*), which constitutes heedlessness.

This form of repentance is the reality of repentance, because real repentance means to kill the lower self (*nafs*), as the Most High said, “*So repent to your Creator, and kill your (lower) selves.*”⁴ (True repentance is when one does not perceive the repentance, nor perceive anything belonging to it; neither action, nor spiritual station, nor station. This is repentance from repentance: “*Surely Allāh loves the repentant.*”⁵ In other words, (those who repent) from repentance.

4 Qur'ān, 2:54.

5 Qur'ān, 2:222.

STEADFASTNESS

The second (abode of Islām) is steadfastness (*istiqāma*), which means traveling (*sulūk*) the straight path without deviation from the structure of the path. Allāh, Blessed and Exalted is He, enumerated ten qualities of the straight path in the “Chapter of the Cattle (*Sūrat al-An‘ām*) by His statement:

Say, “Come, I will recite that which your Lord has made a sacred duty on you: that you do not associate anything as a partner with Him, that you be good to your parents; that you do not kill your children because of poverty – it is We who provide for you and them; that you do not approach shameful deeds, whether openly or secretly; and that you do not take human life which Allāh has made sacred, except in the course of legal justice. This He has commanded you, so that you may discern.

Do not come near to the orphan’s property, except to improve it, until he reaches maturity. Give full measure and weight, in justice. We do not burden any soul beyond its capacity. And if you give your word, do justice to it, even though it be (against) a kinsman; and fulfill the covenant of Allāh. This He has commanded you, so that you may remember.

Verily this is My straight path, so follow it. Do not follow other ways, they will sever you from His way.⁶

So the goal of the straight path as designated is action, putting in practice these properties. The first is not associating partners with Allāh; then not taking the life

6 Qur’ān, 6:151-153.

Allāh has made sacred, not killing one's children fearing poverty, abandoning shameful deeds whether openly or secretly, and so forth. The steadfastness of the common folk is thus fulfilling the rights of the straight path.

For the elite, steadfastness is traveling the straight path, while the Messenger of Allāh, peace and blessings upon him, is with them. So this means annihilation in the Prophet, along with (annihilation in) loving him and his character, thus molding oneself with his character, both openly and secretly. This entails busying oneself with his remembrance, invoking blessings on him, and praying for him in every breath. This is the steadfastness mentioned in the statement of the Most High, "*Those who say our Lord is Allāh, and are steadfast, the Angels descend on them, saying, 'Do not fear nor grieve, but listen to the good tidings of the Paradise promised you.'*"⁷

The steadfastness of the elite is that nothing of the creation persists in you, even if concealed; and what is repulsive (*khabiṭh*) is completely unknown. This steadfastness is more comprehensive than the general steadfastness, since normally affairs fall into various categories: obligatory, preferred, neutral, disliked, and forbidden.

GOD - CONSCIOUSNESS

The third (abode of Islām) is the fear of Allāh (*taqwā*), which means carrying out the commandments and avoiding the prohibitions, openly and secretly, publicly and privately. So complete implementation of the commandments and complete avoidance of the prohibitions is the fear of the common folk. Among the elite, fear of Allāh is to remember Him and not to forget Him, to obey

7 Qur'ān, 41:30.

Him and not to disobey Him. The Most High said, “O you who believe, fear Allāh as He should be feared.”⁸ This refers to the degree of the elite (in God-consciousness), just as the Most High’s statement, “Fear Allāh as much as you can,”⁹ refers to the degree of the common folk.

The fear of the elite of the elite is when nothing occurs to the mind except by Allāh even for a single moment. The gnostic says, “If other than You should occur to my mind, it is a selfish desire afflicting my thought, heedlessly, for which I would be guilty of apostasy (*ridḍa*).” But this is the spiritual state (*hāl*) of the gnostic and the spiritual station (*maqām*) of the unique and comprehensive saintly pole (*al-qutb al-fard al-jāmi‘*). The poet is here speaking of his spiritual state, but this (permanent) state of mind is not incumbent on the (ordinary) gnostic. This type of fear is alluded to in Allāh’s saying, “Surely Allāh loves the God-fearing.”¹⁰

TRUTHFULNESS

The second station of the Religion is the station of Īmān (faith). Its first abode is truthfulness (*ṣidq*), which is working righteousness seeking the Countenance of Allāh the Most High. He said:

Righteousness is having faith in Allāh, the Last Day, the Angels, the Scripture, and the Prophets; and to give of your wealth, for love of Him, to your kin, to the needy, to the traveler, to those who ask, and for freeing slaves; and to establish the prayer and to pay the poor-due; and to fulfill the contracts you have made; and to

8 Qur’ān, 3:102.

9 Qur’ān, 64:16.

10 Qur’ān, 3:76.

*be patient in tribulation, adversity, and time of stress. Such are the truthful ones.*¹¹

Such is the truthfulness of the common folk.

The truthfulness of the elite is the truthfulness in the love of Allāh's Exalted Essential Being (*al-dhāt al-ʿaliyya*). Arrival to the Exalted Essential Being becomes more beloved to him than everything in existence, and Allāh's Name is more beloved to him than any name, and Allāh's Speech is more beloved than any other words, and Allāh's satisfaction is more beloved to him than any other satisfaction, and Allāh's beloveds (*aḥbāb*) are more beloved to him than his own beloveds. So this is the truthfulness of the elite, and the Most High said, "*Be among the truthful ones.*"¹² The person who has attained this station does not attach his mind to the love of anything unless Allāh desires that he find it. The mind of the truthful person does not become attached to anything that Allāh does not want to exist for him. "*And that is the bounty of Allāh, which He gives to whom He wills, and Allāh is the possessor of great bounty.*"¹³

The truthfulness of the elite of the elite is to attest (*taṣḍīq*) to everything conveyed to the Prophetic Presence from the Divine Presence; whether knowledge, spiritual state, secrets, conduct, rights, or duties. Whoever attains truthfulness to this degree possesses the best form of truthfulness.

SINCERITY

The second (abode of faith) is sincerity (*ikh-lās*). Sincerity is to act upon the commandments and to forsake the

11 Qur'ān, 2:177.

12 Qur'ān, 9:119.

13 Qur'ān, 57:21.

prohibitions for the sake of Allāh’s Noble Countenance, for if you find in yourself any ostentation, concern for reputation, or vanity, you have not attained sincerity. This is the sincerity of the common folk.

The sincerity of the elite is to put the Religion into practice, not for the sake of reward, nor for fear of punishment, nor for attaining to a spiritual station (*maqām*). Rather, you worship Allāh out of yearning (for Him). Worship (*‘ubūdiyya*) means that you put the Religion into practice for no other reason than the fact Allāh deserves to be worshipped, and you are a servant for whom nothing else is fitting besides service. So you act for His sake, and you do not perceive yourself deserving anything from Him. You give witness to the blessing, and He gives witness to your good deeds. Indeed, such deeds are from Him to you. He created them, and attributed them to you from His grace and blessing.

The sincerity of the elite of the elite is to banish all otherness in your dealing with the Real (*al-Haqq*), and surely your own self (*nafs*) is among the otherness so banished. Like this you will perceive that all works (*‘amal*) are from Allāh, to Allāh, and by Allāh. You have no entry in them and no exit from them. Know that Allāh loves (such) sincere ones.

TRANQUILITY

The third (abode of faith) is tranquility (*tuma’nīna*). Tranquility is the stillness of the heart with Allāh, its sufficiency in Allāh from everything else, and its dwelling (*baqā’*) with Allāh. Youthful speculations as to what will benefit or harm the self no longer exist in the heart. Rather the soul (*nafs*) has become calm in Allāh’s Hands. The tongue of this spiritual state says, “O Allāh, on You is

my reliance...¹⁴ This is the meaning of tranquility, but it is not possible except for the elite. The tranquility of the elite of the elite consists in their certain knowledge that there is nothing other than Allāh in existence. The soul of such a person does not rest except in Him, and does not return except to Him, and its address from Allāh is “*O soul in tranquility, return to Your Lord.*”¹⁵

A W A R E N E S S

The third station of the Religion is spiritual excellence (*iḥsān*). Its first abode is awareness (*murāqaba*), which is continuous presence with Allāh. The knowledge gained by His acquaintance permeates the entirety of the servant, so that this notion (of Divine proximity) never leaves him. The reality is disclosed to him from behind a subtle veil, so he gains experiential understanding. The one who arrives to this station may speak words that do not reflect the perfect specification of the spiritually arrived, for he has not fully arrived since the reality is disclosed to him from behind a subtle veil. He takes knowledge by means of understanding and experience, not direct witnessing. So this is the awareness of the elite before witnessing. The awareness after witnessing is the awareness of the elite of the elite. This awareness is most precious, and is a station among the stations of the spiritually distinguished (*al-rijāl*), the result of gnosis.

14 This is a reference to an important supplication of the Tijāniyya order (see Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Tijānī, *Aḥzāb wa awrād* (Dakar: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, unknown date), 139-140) used by Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niassé for the spiritual training (*tarbiya*) of disciples. See the section on supplications later in this book.

15 Qur’ān, 89:27-28.

WITNESSING

The second (abode of *ihsān*) is witnessing (*mushāhada*), which is the ocular vision of the Real by the Real, without misgiving, doubt, or delusion. This is because nothing remains except the Real, by the Real, in the Real. So long as a single hair of the servant should remain in existence, he will not arrive to this station. Nay, he must pass away from himself, from all otherness and concern for what is other. The tongue of this spiritual state says, “Nothing remains except Allāh, nothing other than Him; so there is no object of arrival, and nothing to be made clear.” Here there is no name and no description, no designation and no delimitation. This vision is without explanation, and it has no differentiation and no union, no direction and no reception, no beginning, no connection, and no separation. There is no remembrance, no one performing the remembrance, and no object of remembrance. “*Truth has come and falsehood has perished. Surely falsehood is ever bound to perish.*”¹⁶

This degree is the closest of degrees to the spiritual opening (*fath*), and what came before this was not by such opening. Witnessing is the door of gnosis (*maʿrifa*), but it is not gnosis. Every gnostic has been opened, but not every opened one is a gnostic.

GNOSIS

The third (abode of *ihsān*) is gnosis (*maʿrifa*), which is when the spirit becomes thoroughly familiar with and fixed in the presence of (Divine) witnessing, with complete annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and subsequent remaining (*baqāʾ*) by Allāh. The gnostic according to the Sufis is the one who either sees otherness as the Essence (*ʿayn*), or

16 Qurʾān, 17:81.

who witnesses the Real in otherness. But the gnostic with me is the one who finds annihilation once in the Divine Essence (*dhāt*), and in the Attribute two or three times. So he finds annihilation in the Name once, and bears witness to the existence through the three (Attributed) Realities, bearing witness to the Names by the Name. This is a station that would require stripping the thorn-bush of its leaves and the shredding of internal organs, but it is not obtained by sacrifice of wealth and children.¹⁷ The resident of this station is completely awake to Allāh, His wisdom and His rulings. He is content with the manifestation of the decrees of Divine ordainment. He has obtained a perfect contentment with Allāh, so Allāh is contented with him. His soul (*nafs*) is thus worthy of being addressed by the words of the Most High: “*So enter the company of My (honored) servants, and enter My Paradise.*”¹⁸

Gnosis is the last station of the Religion while repentance (*tawba*) is the first. Even still, repentance is better than gnosis since (true) repentance is the result of gnosis. This is because the reality of repentance is to be absent from repentance. For this reason Shaykh Tijānī, the Seal of Saints, may Allāh be pleased with him, used to say, “I swear by Allāh – other than whom there is no god – I did not reach the station of repentance (*maqām al-tawba*).” He meant, may Allāh be pleased with him, that he had repented from seeing his own repentance, for so long as the servant sees the repentance belonging to himself, he has not reached the station of repentance...

17 In other words, it is a station only obtained through Allāh’s favor. I thank Moctar Ba for relating to me the interpretation of this sentence from Shaykh Baye Ould al-Haiba, interview, Medina-Baye Senegal, 3 January, 2015.

18 Qur’ān, 89:30.

The reality of repentance is the repentance from repentance, for “surely Allāh is He who accepts repentance, the Merciful.”¹⁹

The reality of steadfastness (*istiqāma*) is the remaining (*baqāʾ*) after annihilation (*fanāʾ*): “Verily, Allāh ordains what He wills.”²⁰

The reality of fear (*taqwā*) is the absence of thought unless it comes from the Divine Mind (*al-khātir*), even for a single moment: “That is because Allāh is the Real.”²¹

The reality of truthfulness (*ṣidq*) is the singular devotion to Allāh: “Everything will perish except His Countenance.”²²

The reality of sincerity (*ikhhlās*) is that you do not see good deeds proceeding from you, returning to you, or being owned by you. Whatever is in the heavens and earth is from Him. “To Him return all affairs.”²³ “His is the sovereignty, to Him belongs all praise.”²⁴

The reality of tranquility (*tumaʾnīna*) is that you do not wish for the end of what is, nor the existence of what is not. “Surely Allāh knows and you do not know.”²⁵ “He is not asked about what He does.”²⁶

The reality of awareness (*murāqaba*) is the ceaseless attachment of the heart to Allāh. “Verily, your Lord is ever watchful.”²⁷ “And there is no affair in which you are engaged, no portion of the Qurʾān which you recite, and no deed that you are doing, except that We are witness

19 Qurʾān, 9:104.

20 Qurʾān, 5:1.

21 Qurʾān, 31:30.

22 Qurʾān, 28:88.

23 Qurʾān, 42:53.

24 Qurʾān, 64:1.

25 Qurʾān, 16:74.

26 Qurʾān, 21:23.

27 Qurʾān, 89:14.

over you while you are engaged in it.”²⁸ “And We know what his soul whispers to him, for We are closer to him than his jugular vein.”²⁹ “There is no secret council of three except that He is the fourth of them.”³⁰ “Surely Allāh is the one knowledgeable of what is in the hearts.”³¹

The reality of witnessing (*mushāhada*) is the vision of the Real with the eyes: “Everywhere you turn, there is the Countenance of Allāh.”³²

The reality of gnosis (*maʿrifa*) is the direct witnessing of the perfection of the Divine Being (*al-kamāl al-dhātī*). “There is nothing like to Him.”³³

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28 Qurʾān, 10:61.

29 Qurʾān, 50:16.

30 Qurʾān, 58:7.

31 Qurʾān, 3:154.

32 Qurʾān, 2:115.

33 Qurʾān, 42:11.