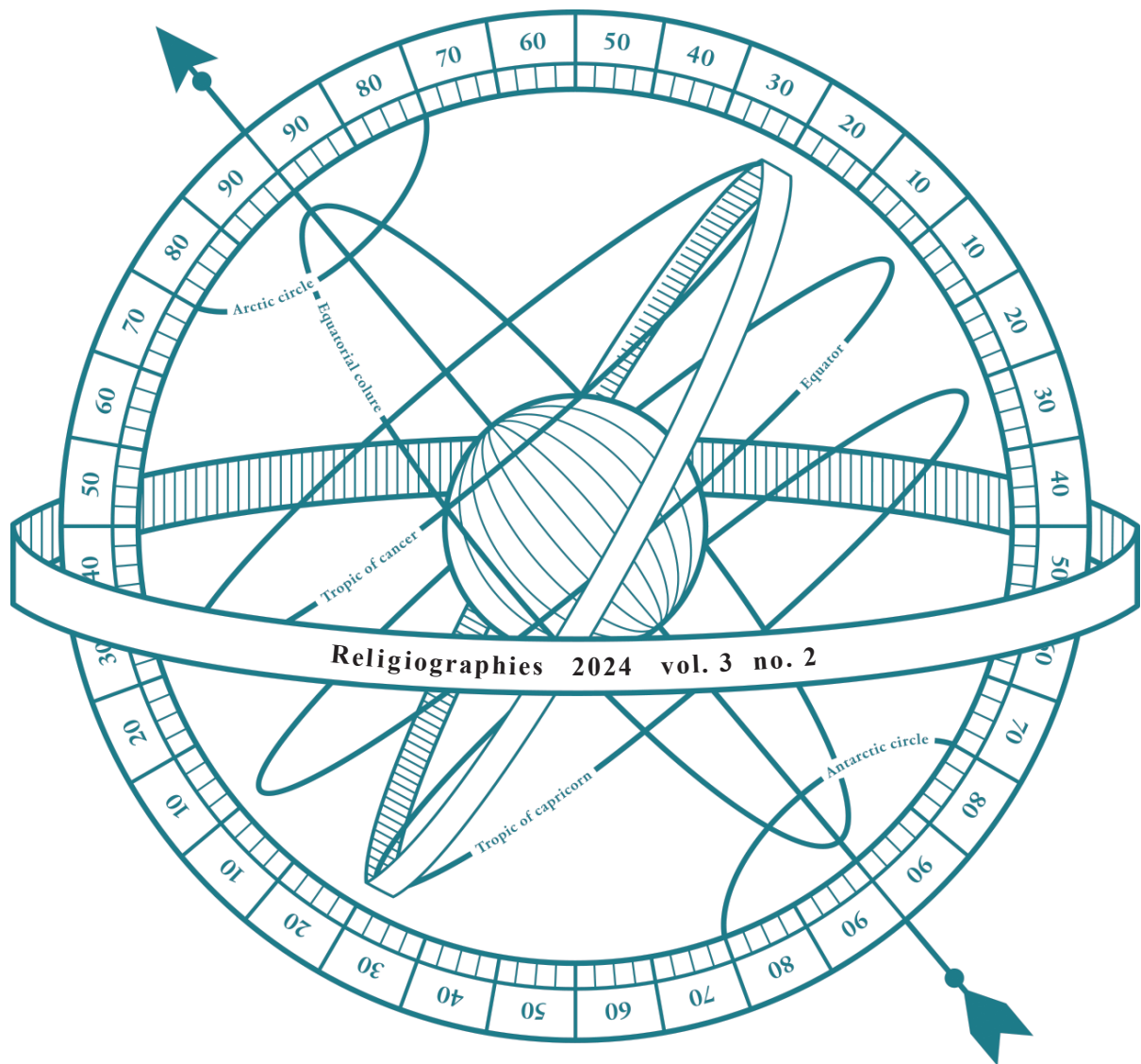


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue

“Reviving Muhyi al-Din: Contemporary Uses of  
Ibn ‘Arabi’s Thought and Reinventions of Islam”

edited by

Mark J. Sedgwick and Gregory Vandamme

# Heterography 2:

## *The Dot and the Saint* Michele Petrone and Eyas Alshayeb

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## Note by the Editors

This heterography is the result of the collaboration between the calligrapher Eyas Alshayeb and the scholar Michele Petrone. Alshayeb selected a book by the contemporary Sufi master Shaykh 'Arif al-Khatib al-Hasani on Islamic calligraphy which contains some important Sufi theological reflections. The choice of this book has been guided by a personal, spiritual relation between the calligrapher and the author. Petrone translated key passages of this book for this heterography and helped Alshayeb to elaborate his ideas on Sufism and calligraphy.

This heterography offers traditional Islamic calligraphies, highlighting how they are structured from a theological perspective (see Petrone's translation) and from a technical perspective (see the lines/trajectories on which the proportions are based). Finally, Alshayeb drew a new and innovative calligraphy: a homage to Saint George, which is the logo of the Giorgio Cini Foundation, based on the isle of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice. This transmutation has been inspired by the same trans-cultural and trans-religious figure of Saint George, who overlaps with the Islamic figure of Al-Khidr and with the Biblical prophet Elijah. This phenomenon, that includes also Saint George in certain contexts, is not just an artistic intuition created by Alshayeb, but something that exists in reality in several shared sacred sites around the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>

1. Karen Barkey et al., ed. *Shared Sacred Sites* (New York: New York Public Library, 2018). <https://www.otheringandbelonging.org/sharedsacredsites/>.

### A Note on the Translated Text: the *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāmiyya* by Shaykh al-'Arif al-Ḥasanī

This is a compendious text that collects commented quotations about the spiritual meaning of single letters of the Arabic alphabet. Authors quoted include not only seminal figures of Medieval Sufism, like Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) and 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1356), but also less known authors, at least to Western audience, like the *shī'i* Rajab al-Bursi (d. 1411) or Shyakh al-'Alawi of Mostaghanem (d. 1934). Al-'Arif's aim in compiling this work is to collect in a single place all the essential notions of the discipline called *'ilm al-ḥurūf*, the science of letters, specifically for what concerns the so-called "separated letters" (*ḥurūf muqaṭṭa'a*) that are found at the beginning of twenty-nine of the 114 *sūras* of the Qur'an.<sup>2</sup> The literature on this topic, especially from Sufi authors, is enormous. The interpretations vary from anagrams, to specific meanings of certain letters, based on their shape or their articulation point when pronounced.<sup>3</sup> An example of these various interpretations is in the so-called commentary of Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687), referred to the opening letters of the second *sūra* (The Cow), *alif*, *lām*, and *mīm*:

*Alif* stands for Allah, *lām* for the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl) and *mīm* for Muhammad. It is also said *alif* stands for Allah's blessings (*'alā'uh*), *lām* for His kindness (*luṭfuhu*) and *mīm* for His dominion (*mulkuhu*). It is also said that *alif* stands for the beginning of the Name Allah, *lām* for the beginning of His Name the Kind (*al-Laṭīf*) and *mīm* for the beginning of His Name the Glorious (*al-Majīd*).<sup>4</sup>

Letters, according to Sufis, are eternal, as it is God's speech in the Qur'an.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the discussion of the science of letters is not simply grammatical, but essentially a form of spiritual interpretation of the cosmos as just an image of the *logos* that is the Qur'an. This notion is at the basis of the selection made here, where much space is given to the dot as the source of all letters. The oft-quoted tradition, attributed to 'Ali b. Abi Talib, that every science is in the Qur'an, and the whole Holy Book is in the Opening *sūra* (*al-Fātiḥa*), which is contained in the formula *bi'smī' Llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, in the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. Finally, everything is in the dot under the letter *bā'*, with which the formula begins. Starting from this tradition, Shaykh al-'Arif illustrates, through the words of ancient Sufi masters, how the dot is not only the measure of the letters, as evident in the calligraphies, but also the true metaphysical source of all of them. The passages here are focused essentially on these two aspects, and on the manifestation of the dot in two letters, the *alif* and the *wāw*. These are two of the three long vowels of Classical Arabic (the third being the *yā'*), with the peculiarity that they are ligated to the preceding letter, and not to the following one. A technical aspect that must be underlined is the realization of the letters through the pen (*qalam*). The form of the dot is defined by the dimension and the inclination of the pen, that, in its turn, determines all the letters. Each calligraphic style has specific characteristics, that derive primarily from the *qalam* and its use.

### About the Meanings of the Dot<sup>6</sup>

Says the *shaykh* 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (may God have mercy of him): Know, may God help you with His Sacred Spirit, that the dot is the inner reality (*ḥaqīqa al-ḥaqā'iq*) of the letters, in the same way as the Essence is the inner reality of Existence. Its relation with the letters is the same as the Divine Essence with the Attributes. So, as the Essence manifests itself (*tatajallā*) in the Attributes and the Names according to the determination of their realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), so the Attribute "Giver of Blessings" (*al-Mun'im*) is manifested in the benefits, "The Avenger" (*al-Muntaqim*) in revenge. In the same way the dot is manifested in every letter according to the determination of the letter itself. When you know this you should understand that every letter is a dot after another; they are made by the dot and there is not a letter that is not a compound of dots. Without the dot there would be no letter, and, without the Essence, no Attributes would be manifested, and without you, there would be no letter. Verily, were there no Essence, the attributes would not be manifested and were there no you, there would be none of those realities, universal and particular, higher and lower, Divine or created, because you are the most noble viceregent (*khalīfa*). Know that the dot, in its tininess' has an enormous value, uncountable, because every letter and word derives from it, and it does not diminish, nor it undergoes any alteration regarding of the letters or the words that are or will be manifested in existence, except when ink is dissolved in the sea. This is why al-Khidr told Moses (peace be upon him) when the ways parted: Moses' intuitive knowledge (*'ilm ladunnī*) was comparable to al-Khidr's. They were both on the sea shore and a bird came and started digging a hole with his beak. Al-Khidr told Moses: our knowledge, compared to Gods' is like the hole this bird dug compared to the sea. Know that the dot has the highest rank in existence, as Divinity is among the exclusive characters of Essence, the supreme rank among letters is one of the exclusive characteristics of the dot. It holds the most noble rank among them. [ . . ] All the letters are the locus of manifestation for the dot, so that the act of producing the letters as a traced sign belongs to the dot. To God belong the highest metaphors! Know that to the inner aspects of the dot belong diverse dispositions that are the inner realities of the letters, of the words, and of the meanings existentiated as a whole. So the dot is a metaphor of those realities, like the ink for the written letters. That alludes to the activities of the Divine Essence: all existentiated beings are determined by an activity of the Essence and, due to this, the existence of all beings is a Divine Self-Disclosure (*tajallī*). The relation between the letters and the dot is the same as the one the Divine Attributes have with with the Essence. In the same way, words, that are made of letters, are like existentiated beings, and their relative meanings are like the Divine self-disclosure in created beings, without any form of incarnation: as the meaning is not incorporated in single letters, the same happens with Divine self-disclosure in His creatures; here there is no form of incarnation, and God is too High for this! Know that, even if there are several dots in one letter, they share the same inner reality, in the same way as you can count single human beings, but the human nature remains one in itself. Know also that the dot occurs twenty-two times in the letters of the alphabet [ . . ]. If you multiply this number by the forms in which they occur on the letters (one, two or three), you get sixtysix, that corresponds to the numerical value of the word Allah. The essence of this is that the places of manifestation of the Divine Essence in existence are [divided in] three levels: the Names, the Attributes and the Actions. The totality is Allah, may He be exalted. So understand! Know, may God Most High help you, that the dot is, metaphorically, the spirit, and the letter is the body. So, when you write a single letter and put its dots over it, you are insufflating in it the spirit, making its inner nature complete. Know that the unification (*tawḥīd*) of the dot is a proof of God's unicity (*aḥadiyya*) in existence, as He is pure absolute existence (*maḥḍ al-wujūd muṭlaq*), as there is no other existent than Him. The duplication of the dot is a proof that, considering the whole manifested existence, God Most High has two places of manifestation: the first is real and eternal, and corresponds to His self disclosure in His Names and attributes; the second one is created and temporal (*ḥādith*) and it corresponds to His self disclosure in His created beings, without incarnation or fusion, but as it is in His own right. This is the reason why a second dot is manifested, alluding to the creation (*wad'*) of these realities. The three dots indicate the Divine self-disclosures in all places of manifestation, that are divided in three categories:

1. self-disclosures of the Essence, which are the Divine Names that do not bring a descriptive meaning, like the One (*al-Aḥad*), the Everlasting (*al-Ṣamad*) and others among the Names of the Essence.
2. self-disclosures of the Attributes, that correspond to the rest of the Names, that bring a descriptive meaning, like the Living (*al-Ḥayy*) or the Potent (*al-Qādir*).

3. self-disclosures of the Acts, that consist in the manifestation of His Attributes in His creation and His Acts, like the Creator (*al-Khāliq*) and the Provider (*al-Rāziq*).<sup>7</sup>

### On the Meaning of Letter *alif*

Ibn ‘Arabi was asked whether the *alif* was a letter of the alphabet or not. He answered: the *alif* is not among the letters for those who smelled the perfume of inner realities (*haqā’iq*); nonetheless, the common people call it a letter, when the one who has reached spiritual realization (*muḥaqqiq*) says that it is a letter, it does it metaphorically and as a figure of speech.

The *alif* of the Essence is transcendent. “Is there for you among created beings a spring and a barren land?” He replied: “Nothing else is united to me (*altafānī*) as I am a perpetuating letter (*ta’bīd*) joined with everlasting eternity” I am the feeble servant, the chosen one; I am from the Power of my Sultan, form His Might.

Ibn ‘Arabi continues saying: the station of the *alif* is where the Name Allah is united (*jam’*) to the other Names. It has the attribute of self-subsistency (*qayyūmiyya*) and Names of action. [. . .] The Greatest Master Ibn al-‘Arabi says: the *alif* flows in the articulation points of all letters, in the same way as the the unit flows in all the degrees of the numbers. . . it is what keeps the letters straight (*qayyim*), and it is transcendent, without any comparison. [. . .] Know that the manifestation of the *alif* from the dot has no cause, as the dot, like a drop of sweat, runs over its cheek, writing good tidings. The original *alif* is not a pen stroke or its similes. It is, indeed, the result of the bleeding of the dot from its original center. When the dot perspires, from it come the *alif*, not in any other way. Saying that it is not the result of a pen stroke means that there is no existentiatio, no extention, no self-subsistence [in the *alif*]. Its transcendence is manifested when it is found in all the other letters, in their curves, upstroke and the other shapes they take. The *alif* in its essence is transcendent, but in its attributes it is immanent, resembling in this the other letters.<sup>8</sup>

### On the Meaning of the Letter *wāw*

Your *Wāw* is more saint than my existence (*wujūdī*), and rarer It is the perfecting spirit, the secret of the hexagon Until its source appears, calles the Sacred House Its home is the the Highets Lote-tree, with its roots in ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

The speaking image of the *wāw* is like this *و*. The first *waw* is [Divine] Ipseity (*huwiyya*), where the *hā’* [before the *wāw*] is incorporated as the number five in the six, so it is independent from it. The other *wāw* is the *wāw* of the creations (*al-kawn*) and it is manifested in it and in the Creator (*al-Mukawwin*) as well, as the *wāw* of the Ipseity. This second *wāw* is also the intermediary between the Divine Ipseity and creation, being hidden in the command “Be!” (*kun*). Were it manifested in the command giving existence to the creation, the latter would have been able to contemplate Him (*al-Huwa*) directly: this would be the obliteration of the inner reality of Him, which does not allow contemplation, as Him is the Absolutely Concealed.<sup>10</sup>

2. See Keyth Massey, “Mysterious Letters,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 471–76.

3. For a synthetic, yet complete, introduction to the discipline see Denis Gril, “La science des lettres,” in *Les illuminations de La Mecque*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz and William C. Chittick, La Bibliothèque de l’Islam (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), 165–282.

4. Tafsiṛ Ibn ‘Abbās: Great Commentaries of the Holy Qur’an 2, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008), 5.

5. al-Shaykh ‘Arīf ‘Arīf al-Khaṭīb al-Ḥasanī al-Shāfi’ī al-Tijānī, *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāniyya fī asrār ḥurūf al-Qur’ān al-ihsāniyya* (*Splendours of the lights of the imams about the secrets of the most noble letters of the Qur’an*), (Bayrūt: Dar Medad, 2016), 6–7.

6. The following are excerpts from the *Bawāriq al-anwār al-īmāniyya*, translated by Michele Petrone.

7. *Bawāriq*, 11–13, passim.

8. *Bawāriq*, 17.

9. *Bawāriq*, 181.

10. *Bawāriq*, 182.



Fig. 1. A Basmala in Dīwānī style according to the Ottoman calligraphic school of Istanbul. Made according to the manual respecting the golden proportions.



Fig. 2. A Basmala in Muḥaqqaq style according to the Baghdad calligraphic school. Made according to the golden ratio proportions.



Fig. 3. Calligraphic exercise of the letter *bā'* according to the proper proportions, also including the calligraphic trajectories of the *bā'* with different incidences.





Fig. 4. Calligraphic composition of the verse *وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا* (We have appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another, Qur. 49:13).



Fig. 5. Calligraphic composition of the verse *وقل رب اغفر وارحم وانت خير الراحمين* (And say: My Lord, forgive and have mercy, for Thou art the best of the merciful, Qur. 23: 118).



Fig. 6. Calligraphy exercise in thuluth style of the letter *bā'* and various incidences of writing with other letters. Calligraphic trajectories of the word *bism* and the word *sirr*.

This **St. George** calligraphy is a homage to the saint in his most famous representation, that of a knight defeating the dragon. This image symbolizes the effort that human beings constantly make to fight the temptations of the *nafs*, the lower self, in its primordial nature symbolized by the dragon, and the spear symbolizing the instant of defeat. The figure of the horse includes a verse from the *sūra* of the Cave (*al-Kahf*, 18: 65), where the Qur'an refers to al-Khidr, the mysterious figure whom Moses met at the "confluence of the two seas" of life and death. The verse reads: فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِمَّا لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا, meaning "Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us."<sup>11</sup> The figure of the dragon contains verses 7 and 8 of *sūra* of the Sun (*al-Shams*, 91:7-8) that refers to *al-nafs*, the lower soul that the Sufi must discipline through spiritual practice. It reads: وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا, meaning "By the soul, and That which shaped it and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing!"<sup>12</sup> The dragon is representing the *nafs* that the Sufi is killing with the practice and the acquisition of knowledge, thanks to God's favor, the He bestows on his servants.

11. Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran*, Reissued, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 131.  
 12. Arberry, *The Koran*, 277.



Fig. 7. In the figure of the horse is written verse 65 of the *sūra* of the Cavern: فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِمَّا لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا (Then they found one of Our servants unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and We had taught him knowledge proceeding from Us). In the dragon are verses 91: 7–8, referring to the *nafs*: وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا (By the soul, and That which shaped it, and inspired it to lewdness and godfearing!). In the cloak it is written القديس جورجيس الصوفي ابن وقته (Saint George. The Sufi is son of His instant).

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### A few words about Michele Petrone and Eyas Alshayeb

Michele Petrone is post-doc fellow at the University of Napoli L'Orientale. His main research focus is the history of texts and their circulation, both in manuscript and printed form. His work on Sufism has been focused on the work of Ibn 'Arabi and on the Tijani Sufi order.

[michele.petrone@unior.it](mailto:michele.petrone@unior.it)

The artist Eyas Alshayeb, born in the heart of Amman in the 1980s, was influenced from childhood by a family environment where art, poetry, and literature were seen as essential elements of daily life. He was drawn to the art of calligraphy through the passion and curiosity that led him, during his adolescence, to learn this wonderful art in the shop of a local calligraphy master. He later explored various calligraphy schools, such as the Egyptian school of master Khudair Bursaidi. From the age of 15, he studied with some of the most important figures in Middle Eastern Arabic calligraphy, drawing from each of them the most sophisticated calligraphic techniques of the main Ottoman, Baghdad, and Cairo schools. The city of Istanbul has always been a destination for his travels, as it is considered the homeland of Islamic calligraphy. There, he followed the traces and works of the greatest calligraphy masters in history and learned new techniques and skills from contemporary masters. He has been living in Milan (Italy) since 1998, where he studied graphic arts.

[eyas.traduzioni@gmail.com](mailto:eyas.traduzioni@gmail.com)