

## Article

# Hesychasm and Sufism—A Comparison Between Jesus Prayer and Dhikr

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**Abstract:** The comparison between Hesychasm and Sufism focuses on their respective mystical practices: the Jesus Prayer in Hesychasm and Dhikr in Sufism. Both traditions emphasize withdrawing from worldly distractions to achieve spiritual purity and communion with the divine. In Hesychasm, practitioners use the Jesus Prayer to attain inner stillness and experience divine light, aiming for a state of contemplation where the mind is enveloped in spiritual radiance. Similarly, Sufism's Dhikr involves a repetitive invocation of Allah's name to achieve spiritual awareness and unity with God, promoting inner tranquility and protection from negative influences. Both practices stress the continuity of prayer and the progression from vocal to mental recitation, fostering deep spiritual states. Despite theological and doctrinal differences, both traditions share a universal quest for mystical union and emphasize the transformative power of spiritual practice in achieving a direct connection with the divine. These practices continue to shape spiritual life in their respective religious contexts, illustrating common themes of seeking spiritual enlightenment through disciplined meditation and prayer.

**Keywords:** hesychasm; Sufism; Dhikr; Jesus Prayer; mystical; spirituality; union; practice; contemplation

## 1. Introduction

Hesychasm is a mystical tradition that emerged in the 14th century among the monks of Mount Athos, the spiritual heart of the Eastern Orthodox Church during the late Byzantine Empire. The practice is centered around the pursuit of the divine light through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer, accompanied by specific psychophysical techniques involving breathing and posture. This method, rooted in the Greek word "hesychia" (meaning stillness or silence), has sparked theological and philosophical debates regarding the legitimacy of the experiences of its practitioners, known as hesychasts. Today, hesychasm continues to influence the spiritual practices of contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Sufism refers to the mystical teachings and practices within Islam that began in the 7th and 8th centuries, experiencing significant development during the Abbasid Caliphate (9th–12th centuries). During this era, various Sufi orders, known as "tariqah"<sup>2</sup> emerged, spreading Sufi thought and practices. Sufism aims to deepen an individual's connection with God, seeking direct experience of the divine presence. In addition to these mystical experiences, Sufism emphasizes ethical principles, including the control of desires and the ego, as well as the purification of the heart by overcoming negative emotions and malice.

While Hesychasm and Sufism originate from different religious contexts and their respective practices and beliefs are shaped by their own religious frameworks, both traditions share a common emphasis on seeking a deep and personal connection with God, pursuing a mystical union (unio mystica)<sup>3</sup> in a broad sense, and adopting meditative practices such as the repetition of sacred words or phrases and seeking inner silence to connect with God.

Focusing on the religious practices chosen as "paths" in each tradition, namely the Jesus Prayer in Hesychasm and the Dhikr in Sufism, this paper attempts a comparative analysis of these practices. While the overall aim of this article is to discuss the potential for dialogue between Christianity and Islam from the perspective of mystical thought, this



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“mystical thought” constitutes the “heart” of religion. Every religion has both a “head” and a “heart”. The “head” includes its intellectual and theoretical aspects, such as doctrines and scriptures. This part determines the uniqueness and individuality of each religion and serves to distinguish it from others. However, the “head” can only produce “knowledge” if it is nourished by the “heart”. This nourishment is the “mystical essence”. Moreover, the mystical essence is considered to be universal in nature. The aim of this paper is not to compare the “head” of Hesychasm and Sufism, but to examine the universality of the mystical essence, which is the “heart” of both traditions. The chosen material for this exploration is the Dhikr and the Jesus Prayer, both their concrete practices and experiences. Using these practices and experiences as a guide, we aim to identify the common underlying current of both traditions.

### 1.1. Dhikr

Dhikr is a practice in Islam designed to focus one’s thoughts on Allah. The term encompasses both a mental state of “remembering” or “recalling” Allah and the active act of “mentioning” (originally meaning “to describe” or “to recite”). While some translations combine these meanings into the single term “remembrance”, whether “mentioning” refers to the act itself or the mental state depends on the context. Nakamura, highlighting the dual nature of the term “Dhikr”, distinguishes between the “tongue Dhikr” (Dhikr bi-lisān) and “heart Dhikr” (Dhikr bi-’l-qalb) practiced by Sufis, referring to the former as “vocal Dhikr” and the latter as “meditative Dhikr” (Nakamura 1971, p. 142).

The roots of Dhikr can be found in the Qur’ān.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Qur’ān commands “Remember Me and I will remember you” (2:152), or “O you who have faith! Remember Allah with frequent remembrance” (33:41), and further, “And remember your Lord in your hearts with supplication and reverence, without being loud, morning and evening, and do not be of the heedless” (7:205). While it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish whether the command is to “remember” or to make a vocal invocation, both aspects have been valued and practiced in later Dhikr traditions.

Dhikr aims to cultivate an awareness of God’s presence and divinity, seeking to unite the individual’s consciousness with the divine. By repeatedly reciting God’s name, one’s focus is drawn toward love and faith in God, thereby strengthening the bond with the divine presence. The practice of Dhikr also fosters inner purification and tranquility, helping to release worldly distractions and anxieties, and allowing for a sense of inner peace and stillness. Moreover, Dhikr can be practiced both individually and within Sufi communities, where collective Dhikr fosters unity, creating shared religious experiences and spiritual connections among practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

However, the methods and practices of Dhikr vary across different Sufi orders and their respective leaders. This paper focuses on two key figures as examples: the Persian theologian and mystic al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), who played a pivotal role in establishing Dhikr as a central practice within Islam in the 12th century, and Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh al-Iskandarī (1259–1310), an Egyptian Maliki jurist and the third “murshid” (spiritual guide or master) of the Shādhilī Sufi order. Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh significantly contributed to formalizing and popularizing structured methods of Dhikr, particularly within the Shādhilī tradition of Sufism.

### 1.2. al-Ghazālī

In his major work, *The Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihyā’ ulūm al-dīn)*, al-Ghazālī explains the purpose and methods of Sufism and elaborates on the doctrine of Dhikr, which subsequently became one of the foundations for the development of Sufism and Dhikr.<sup>6</sup>

However, al-Ghazālī’s discourse on Dhikr primarily presents theoretical or explanatory aspects rather than practical guidance. Within this theoretical exposition, the following extracts are particularly noteworthy for their concise presentation of the framework of Dhikr practice. These passages represent an important text that outlines the practice of

Dhikr in a highly condensed form. For the sake of explanation, alphabetical headings are given at the beginning of each paragraph.<sup>7</sup>

- (A). The Sufis assert that the way to this (spiritual knowledge) is, first of all, to cut off all ties with this present world and to empty the heart of them, taking away concern for family, possessions, children, homeland, knowledge, dominion and rank. No, he must bring his heart into a state in which the existence of all these things is the same as their non-existence.
- (B). Then he must retire alone to a place of private devotion and confine himself to the prescribed religious duties and the supererogatory prayers<sup>8</sup>; he must sit with an empty heart and concentrated purpose. He must not divert his mind by reciting the Qur'ān, nor by contemplating its exposition, nor by books of tradition, nor by anything else. But he must make sure that nothing but Allāh enters his mind.
- (C). Then, after sitting down in a separate place, he should continue to say "Allāh, Allāh" with his tongue, and his heart should also be fixed on it, until he finally reaches a state in which the movement of the tongue ceases and it seems as if the word is flowing over his tongue. He must continue in this patiently until every trace of the word is erased from the tongue and he finds his heart persevering in this devotional exercise. He must persevere until the form and the letters of the expression and the very appearance of the word are erased from the heart, and nothing remains in it but the ideal meaning, which, as it were, adheres to the heart and is inseparable from it. To arrive at this point is a matter of his own choice, as is the prolongation of this state by warding off the suggestions of Satan.
- (D). It is not by his choice that he can obtain the gift of Allāh's mercy. By what he has done so far, he has exposed himself to the breeze of Allāh's mercy, and all that remains for him to do is to wait for such mercy as Allāh may grant him, just as He gave His mercy in this way to the prophets and saints.
- (E). When he does this, if his desire is sincere, his intention pure, and his perseverance good, and if his desires do not draw him aside, and the suggestions of the self<sup>9</sup> do not entangle him in the bonds of this present world, then the radiance of Reality will shine into his heart. In the beginning it will be like a dazzling flash of lightning. It is not continuous, but it returns, though it may be delayed. If it returns, it may continue, and it may be but a flash. If it continues, it may be for a longer or shorter time. These different types may appear, one following the other, or they may be confined to one type. The stages of Allāh's saints in this regard are unlimited, even though the superiority of their nature and moral character is not to be reckoned with. So, this way goes back to absolute purification and clarification and enlightenment of the heart on your part, and then only to make ready and wait in expectation.

Of course, this method was not originally proposed by al-Ghazālī, but he compactly organized traditions that had been passed down before, most of which had been passed down as isolated anecdotes. He abstracted these traditions into a theoretical framework.<sup>10</sup>

To understand the place of this section within al-Ghazālī's broader doctrine of Dhikr, it is helpful to refer to Nakamura's analysis. Nakamura divides al-Ghazālī's explanation of Dhikr into five progressively deeper stages. The first stage focuses on shifting one's attention from the concerns of the present world to God and the hereafter. The second stage involves spiritual practices centered on the contemplation of death, the afterlife, and God's grace. The third stage consists of repeating the name of God or specific sacred phrases while maintaining mental concentration. The fourth stage entails severing all ties with the present world, allowing the heart to naturally turn toward God's presence. Finally, the fifth stage represents the ultimate level of Dhikr, corresponding to the technique mentioned above.<sup>11</sup>

The fifth stage of Dhikr, characterized by "intense concentration of the heart", enables Sufis to eliminate distractions, achieve complete stillness within, and enter a state of readiness for divine grace. Nakamura observes that in later periods, various Sufi orders refined this advanced form of Dhikr, incorporating techniques such as breathing exercises, physical movements, music, and other elements—including, at times, intoxicating substances. These

developments also gave rise to collective Dhikr rituals that included participation by lay believers.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's treatment of Dhikr in *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* places it at the core of spiritual development, framing it as both a discipline for the soul and a means of achieving divine proximity. This perspective has had a lasting impact on Islamic spirituality and Sufi practices.

### 1.3. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh

Shaykh Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh is mostly known for his compilation of aphorisms *Book of Wisdoms (al-Hikam al-'Aṭā'iyya)* but is also credited with having authored the first systematic treatise on Dhikr, *The Key to Salvation (Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ)*, which is highly important in the history of Dhikr because it offers a profound and comprehensive framework for understanding how "remembrance of God" can serve as the means to spiritual purification, divine proximity, and ultimate salvation. His work emphasizes the inner dimensions of Dhikr, urging practitioners to focus not just on the mechanical repetition of words but on the presence of the heart in the act of remembrance. In this way, Dhikr becomes a spiritual key to unlocking divine mercy and achieving salvation, making Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh's contributions foundational to the development of Sufi practice and thought on Dhikr.<sup>13</sup>

Dhikr, as described in *The Key to Salvation*, transcends mere prayer or religious rituals, embodying a profound spiritual practice. Its ultimate purpose is to purify the heart and bring the believer closer to God. The author compares Dhikr to a means of removing the "rust" from the soul, likening it to polishing a mirror so that it can reflect the divine light of God. This "rust" represents spiritual obstacles such as desires, ignorance, and distractions, which, when eliminated, allow the believer to deeply perceive God's presence.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Dhikr is regarded as one of the most exalted forms of worship, symbolizing the believer's total devotion to God.

Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh dedicates considerable attention to the transformative effects of Dhikr. It is portrayed as a means to guide the believer into a deeper spiritual dimension. Through Dhikr, the believer can attain liberation from distractions and desires, cultivate inner peace, and develop a stronger will to align with God's will. Dhikr draws the believer closer to an intimate relationship with God, ultimately leading to the higher spiritual states of annihilation in God (*fanā*) and subsistence with God.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of solitude (*khalwah*) in deepening the practice of Dhikr is strongly emphasized. Performing Dhikr in solitude and silence allows the believer to be free from worldly influences and fully concentrate on remembering God. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh discusses not only external solitude but also internal solitude, which involves liberating the heart from distractions and desires.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, the goal of Dhikr is union with God. Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh repeatedly underscores that Dhikr should not remain confined to words or actions but should be an act of turning the believer's entire being toward God. Through this practice, the believer experiences God's love and mercy and cultivates a profound sense of intimacy with the divine.

In summary, *The Key to Salvation* provides comprehensive guidance for believers seeking spiritual growth and a closer relationship with God through Dhikr. It portrays Dhikr as the key to ascending to higher spiritual states and opens the door to an intimate connection with the divine.

## 2. The Jesus Prayer

It is noteworthy that the content of the Dhikr as mentioned above bears a remarkable similarity to the instructions on the Jesus Prayer with their psychophysical techniques, probably written in the late 13th century. These early instructional texts, namely "The Method of Holy Prayer and Holy Attention" by Pseudo-Symeon ([Hausherr 1927](#), pp. 150–72) and "On Vigilance and the Guard of the Heart" by the Athonite monk Nikephoros ([Nikodēmos 1961](#), pp. 18–28), are fundamental to the development of the Jesus Prayer in Hesychasm. Like al-Ghazālī's and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh's contributions to the Dhikr tradition,

these two documents became the basis for the development of the Jesus Prayer in later hesychasm. Let us quote the key passages from each of them:

“The Method of Holy Prayer and Holy Attention” (Pseudo-Symeon):

First you must acquire three things: to die to all things, to have a pure conscience that protects you from reproach, and freedom from the passions that incline you to worldly things. Then go into seclusion in a quiet cell, and when you have sat down in a corner, do as I tell you. . . . Close the door and clear your mind of all empty and transitory things. Then press your chin to your chest and with all your mind direct your eyes to the center of your belly, that is, to the navel. Hold back the flow of air through your nostrils so that you do not breathe easily. Search your belly with your inner eye for the place of the heart, where all the faculties of the soul reside. At first you will feel darkness and stubborn resistance, but if you patiently continue this practice day and night, you will discover a joy you have never experienced before. That is to say, the mind . . . sees itself completely enveloped in light. From that moment on, whenever a thought arises, before it takes the form of an image, it will be dispelled and destroyed by invoking the name of Jesus Christ. From now on, the spirit that hates demons will naturally arouse anger, expel spiritual enemies and strengthen your soul (Hausherr 1927, pp. 164–65).

“On Vigilance and the Guard of the Heart (Nikephoros):

First of all, make your life peaceful, free from worry and peaceful in all things. Then enter your room and, having withdrawn, sit down in a corner and do as I tell you. . . . When you sit down, concentrate your mind and, placing your mind, that is, your spirit, in your nostrils, bring it down into your heart. The nostrils are the passage through which the breath enters the heart. Squeeze your mind and draw it down into your heart along with the air you breathe in. When the mind settles there, something will happen. It is something that is never unpleasant or sad. . . . Know this also. While your mind remains in your heart, you must not be silent or inactive. Instead, you must constantly repeat the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” and meditate without interruption. This practice will make your mind steadfast, repel the attacks of your enemies, and prevent you from being defeated by them. Day by day it will increase your love and hope in God (Nikodēmos 1961, p. 27).

### 3. Comparison

In this comparative study, we will use al-Ghazālī’s writings as a foundational framework, incorporate Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh’s perspectives, and proceed by examining the parallels and differences between the two hesychast texts.

#### 3.1. Preconditions for Practice: Withdrawal from the World

A fundamental requirement for Sufis practicing Dhikr is a complete detachment from the secular world (A). This entails not only the renunciation of material possessions but also achieving a state where “the existence of all these things is equivalent to their non-existence”. In essence, the goal is to cultivate a state of “imperturbability”, free from the pull of worldly temptations.

For Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh, effective Dhikr also depends on specific conditions and observances. Physical cleanliness, sincerity of intention, and unwavering focus are indispensable; without these, Dhikr cannot reach its full spiritual potential. Repentance and purification are essential prerequisites, requiring the believer to rectify past transgressions and cleanse the heart of moral impurities. Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh cautions that attempting Dhikr without these preparations may obstruct spiritual progress.<sup>17</sup>

The texts of Hesychasm emphasize a fundamental change in one’s attitude to life as a prerequisite for the practice of the Jesus Prayer, which involves physical and mental

detachment from worldly matters. Pseudo-Symeon speaks of “freedom from the passions that incline one to worldly things”, while Nikephoros advises leading a peaceful and carefree life. Absolute detachment from worldly matters is necessary to create a spiritually conducive environment focused solely on divine matters. This requirement alone demands considerable determination and time from those who embark on the path of prayer. Both Dhikr and the Jesus Prayer are understood as practices that are not easily initiated due to these demanding conditions.

### 3.2. The Posture of Sitting

Al-Ghazālī instructs the reader to “withdraw alone to a place of private devotion apart (zāwiyah)” (B) and to “sit in a place apart” (C). This suggests sitting in a place where one is alone and unnoticed by others. In this respect the instructions are parallel to the Jesus Prayer. Pseudo-Symeon speaks of sitting “in a quiet cell”, while Nikephoros instructs one to “enter one’s room and, having withdrawn, sit in a corner”. The emphasis on both the “corner” and the act of “sitting” is striking. This suggests a visually and aurally minimalist environment conducive to mental concentration. It is noteworthy that al-Ghazālī warns against engaging in activities such as “reciting the Qur’ān or contemplating its exposition or books of tradition (hadith)”. This is a radical (even blasphemous) statement, suggesting that even essential Islamic practices such as Qur’ānic recitation can interfere with Dhikr.

It is important to note that al-Ghazālī does not specifically mention the posture of sitting, whereas Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh mentions physical postures in his guidance for “murid” (an initiated novice on the Sufi Path): “Let us mention now the sitting posture for the invocation. We say: It is in accordance with the rules of conduct (adab) to sit in front of one’s master in a submissive, humble, and unpretentious manner; to put one’s head between one’s knees”.<sup>18</sup> By referring to this bodily posture, Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh means that by lowering the head, one physically manifests an inner state of surrender and acknowledgment of a higher authority, both in terms of human relationships (to a teacher or guide) and in the divine sense (to God); it is a symbol of humility before the spiritual master or before God. In Islamic mysticism and Sufism, physical actions are often tied to the inner state of the heart. The act of bowing one’s head between the knees can be seen as an external manifestation of the internal act of tasfiyah (purification of the soul). It represents a breaking of the ego and a deep act of repentance or seeking closeness to the divine.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Hesychasm, however, the sitting posture is not only symbolic but indeed a crucial point, as will be discussed later.

### 3.3. Recitation, Continuity, and Vocal Elements

Finally, the actual Dhikr begins (C), where one sits alone and continuously recites “God, God” (Allāh Allāh) aloud, concentrating the mind until the effort to move the tongue ceases, “and it will seem as if the word is flowing over the tongue”. Here, attention is drawn to the invocation of “Allah”, the continuity of the repeated recitation of this phrase, and further to the aspect of vocalization, in other words the aspect of vocal Dhikr.

Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh outlines the diverse forms of Dhikr, which include vocal recitation (jahri), silent meditation (khafi), individual practices, and communal gatherings.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the method, concentration and sincerity are deemed essential. Special emphasis is placed on the repetition of God’s names, such as “Allah” or “Huwa”, which helps focus the believer’s heart on God, thereby dispelling worldly desires and distractions.<sup>21</sup> Dhikr is highlighted not as a mechanical repetition but as an act that must involve the entire being, infused with heartfelt intention and devotion.

Regarding the invocation in the Jesus Prayer, Pseudo-Symeon does not specify the exact formula, but implies that the name of “Jesus Christ” is recited from the phrase “invocation of the name of Jesus Christ”. On the other hand, Nikephoros explicitly quotes the formula as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”. This phrase became standard in the Jesus Prayer during the Hesychasm period in the 14th century. Before that, however, there were several variations containing the name of Jesus. Al-Ghazālī’s use of

“God” as an invocation may not have been common at the time. Nevertheless, variations containing the name “God” were adopted by individuals and Sufi orders in later periods.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the emphasis on the “continuity” of recitation is rooted in Qur’anic injunctions such as “Remember your Lord well and glorify Him morning and evening” (3:41) and “O you who have faith! Remember Allah with frequent remembrance” (33:41). With the development of Sufism, however, the continuity of Dhikr as a technique of spiritual concentration came to be emphasized, which seems to correspond to reality.

Similarly, “continuity” has been an important tradition in the history of the Jesus Prayer. This tradition refers to the presence of “unceasing prayer” and a form of prayer known as “monologia”, consisting of standardized, minimal words, which was already practiced in the monastic life that emerged in the deserts of Egypt in the 4th century, in order to preserve the “memory of God” (mnēmē theou). This tradition eventually gave rise to the Jesus Prayer. The emphasis on the continuity of this prayer is therefore natural, since it emerged from the tradition of the “unceasing prayer” of the monologia (Bacht 1955, pp. 360–73).

The continuity of the practice, although not explicitly stated by Pseudo-Symeon, is clearly emphasized by Nicephorus, who instructs, “While your mind remains in your heart, you must neither be silent nor inactive. On the contrary, you must constantly repeat the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” and meditate without interruption”.

In Ghazālī’s perspective, while vocal Dhikr involving the “tongue” is explicitly emphasized, this does not imply the exclusion of the “heart” from the practice. Rather, both the “tongue” and the “heart” are intended to operate in unison. The purpose of engaging the “tongue” is to support and sustain the Dhikr of the “heart”. The ultimate goal is to transition from the movement of the tongue to a state where only the heart remains actively engaged in Dhikr.

Ghazālī clarifies this progression as follows: “until he finally reaches a state in which the movement of the tongue ceases, and it seems as if the word is flowing over his tongue”, and further, “every trace of the word is erased from the tongue, and he finds his heart persevering in this devotional exercise (i.e., Dhikr)”. The process unfolds in stages: from the conscious movement of the tongue to unconscious or automatic movement and ultimately to the cessation of all tongue movement, leaving only the pure mental engagement with Dhikr.

This distinction between the vocal and mental dimensions of Dhikr emerges as a significant feature within the tradition, reflecting its nuanced understanding of spiritual progression.

Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh recommends that a seeker “recite the entire prayer as a litany (wird) until their intellect (basirah) discerns its meaning” and “persevere” in this prayer “day and night”<sup>23</sup>; he should “persist in that invocation until the unity of the world is subsumed for you in a single sphere”.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, he concludes, “When the fruits of this become apparent and its mysteries are made clear to you, at that time you will become worthy of invoking the simple invocation. Then you will say Allah, Allah, Allah permanently”.<sup>25</sup> Regarding this emphasis on the persistency of the invocation, K. Danner-Fadae comments, “The significance of constantly invoking the Divine Name inwardly until it becomes second nature, as it were, for the individual is continually emphasized”.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, it is not entirely clear whether the Jesus Prayer includes a vocal element in the instructions of the two hesychast leaders. In Nicephorus’ instructions, however, it is important to note that he instructs one to “meditate” on the prayer, suggesting a form of recitation that involves both the tongue and the heart, similar to the Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition’s understanding of “meditation” as involving vocalized action.

### 3.4. Effects of Practice: Defense Against Demonic Attacks and Experience of “Light”

Al-Ghazālī asserts that as one becomes absorbed in Dhikr, eventually “the form and letters of expression and the very appearance of the word are erased from the heart, and

there remains in it nothing but the ideal meaning, which, as it were, adheres to the heart and is inseparable from it", indicating a state in which the heart becomes absorbed in the presence of Allah. He explains that this state can be maintained by "rejecting the suggestions of Satan" (C). Here, it is stated that individuals who seek to deepen their connection with God through Dhikr experience the reality of evil thoughts and influences from Satan. Therefore, it is claimed that rejecting such temptations from Satan is a prerequisite for maintaining a state of immersion in the presence of Allāh, and this resistance is said to be a matter of the individual's "choice". But whether the source of this power lies in the individual's own abilities or is bestowed as a "given" effect of Dhikr remains unclear.

Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh also addresses the potential obstacles encountered during the practice of Dhikr. These include distractions, arrogance, and an excessive reliance on rationalism.<sup>27</sup> In particular, he warns against the danger of self-deception, stressing the need for a humble and sincere attitude when performing Dhikr.<sup>28</sup> According to his idea, the attacks of Satan are caused by a slight bit of "egoism": "Whenever there remains any support for the ego (nafs) within, even if it be only an atom's weight, then you are pretentious and have a devil who leads you astray".<sup>29</sup> "Nafs" is for Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh "the ego or self which is worldly and self-centered"<sup>30</sup> and "receptive to the commands of the devil. If it were not receptive to him, he would not find his way to the heart. Its receptivity towards the devil is a proof of its ignorance and of its absence from God Most High".<sup>31</sup> But the Dhikr itself "repels, subdues, and tames Satan"<sup>32</sup>: "For the one who remembers God, invoking unites his dispersed heart and pervades his will and his broken resolve. It scatters his sadness, his sin, and the forces of Satan and his followers".<sup>33</sup>

It is noteworthy that the defense mechanism of the heart against demonic influences is also emphasized as one of the effects of the Jesus Prayer. Pseudo-Symeon states, "From that moment on, whenever a thought arises, it is dispelled and destroyed before it takes the form of an image, by invoking the name of Jesus Christ". Similarly, Nikephoros claims that this practice can "make your mind steadfast, repel the attacks of your enemies, and prevent you from being defeated by them", establishing the defensive posture of the heart as an effect of the Jesus Prayer.

However, this cannot be the only effect; it is secondary. The ultimate effect of both traditions of spiritual practice is commonly understood as an experience of "light", which is the most important aspect to emphasize.

Al-Ghazālī asserts that through the devotional practice of Dhikr one can reach a state in which "the radiance of reality will shine in one's heart" (E). This concept of "reality" refers to "true existence" (al-Wujūd al-Haqīqī). In Sufi philosophy, it is expressed as the culmination of Allah's essence, the primordial source of all things, also referred to as Haqq or Ahad (the Singular Existence). The "radiance" (nūr) emanating from this "reality" is consistent with God, who is referred to in the Qur'an as the "Light of the heavens and the earth" (4:35).

The depiction of this "shimmer" or "light" shining within the soul can be interpreted as a kind of experiential sensation that goes beyond mere symbolic expression. For immediately afterwards, the various manifestations of this "shining" are described, and finally it is assumed that it is an experience clearly related to light, as it is described: "These different kinds may appear, one following the other, or they may be confined to one kind only". The experience of light in Dhikr is also described by Izutsu, who, while reserving judgement on its authenticity, relates accounts of practitioners experiencing the divine light penetrating their souls until they are immersed in overflowing brightness.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh, indeed, frequently uses terms such as "light" or "illumination", as mentioned, for example, in references like "when the invocation descends into the heart, if there is darkness within, it illuminates it; and if there is already light (nur), the invocation increases the light and intensifies it"<sup>35</sup>; "the benefit of the invocation is in a greater or more lasting illumination of the heart"<sup>36</sup>; "the light of the heart would burn away passions and evil spirits. Its own invocation would take hold and that of the tongue would



become weaker; the body and soul would become filled with light<sup>37</sup>". But in his case, these terms seem to function more as symbols rather than in an experiential or perceptible sense.

It is worth noting that the account of the mystical experience of divine light illuminating the heart is at the heart of the hesychast experience. Pseudo-Symeon says that once the mind has found its place in the heart, one will discover a joy that has never been experienced before. That is to say, "the mind . . . sees itself completely enveloped in light". This mystical expression of the "mind" (nous) seeing itself enveloped in light is precisely the reality of the "theoria" (contemplation) that hesychasm seeks to achieve. The one who established this theory of theoria was Evagrius Ponticus, an Egyptian monk of the 4th century. He mentioned in chapter 18 of *On Evil Thoughts* that during prayer one can see one's own state resembling sapphire or heavenly colors.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the mind perceives itself as "light" (phōtoeides)<sup>39</sup> and begins to "see its own light".<sup>40</sup> This inherent light is not a light created by the mind itself, but the light of God Himself, which the mind receives as it "participates in the light of the Holy Trinity"<sup>41</sup> in prayer. Ultimately, "theoria" in the hesychast tradition refers to the contemplation of God's vision, in which the mind sees itself illuminated by light. The quotation from Pseudo-Symeon is faithful to this traditional account of contemplation proposed by Evagrius.

However, there is no mention of this mystical experience of light in Nicephorus's writings. Nevertheless, at the beginning of his instructional manual on spiritual practice, he calls upon his audience, "All of you, who have an ardent desire to attain the intense and divine manifestation of the light of our Savior Jesus Christ" (Nikodēmos 1961, p. 18). Here, it can be strongly inferred that the purpose of his guidance is to achieve the experience of the "intense and divine manifestation of the light of Jesus Christ". This is understood to be the specific representation of the "Light of Tabor" unique to Hesychasm, where the "light" refers to the light emitted by the transfigured Christ. The hesychasts sought the "Light of Tabor" because, within the Patristic tradition, the story of transfiguration prefigures the resurrected Christ and is interpreted as a precursor to the glory of Christ in His Second Coming. The fact that the three disciples were able to bathe in this glory was precisely because they themselves were transformed, and the possibility of this transformation extends not only to them but to all humanity. That is, through the mystical experience of light in contemplation, one can be transformed into a "deified" being capable of "seeing" the radiant light of the glorified Christ.<sup>42</sup>

In any case, although the interpretation of light may differ, whether in Hesychasm or Sufism, the light shining within the heart is understood to come from God and is a mystical experience that may result from the spiritual practice, demonstrating the potentiality of divine grace.

### 3.5. Techniques and Effects

In addition to the above, al-Ghazālī expresses a clear opinion on the question of whether such mystical experiences of light are made possible by the technique of Dhikr. He says, "It is not by his choice that he can obtain the gift of Allāh's mercy. By what he has done so far, he has exposed himself to the breeze of Allāh's mercy, and all that remains for him is to wait for such mercy as Allāh may grant him" (D). The term divine "mercy" (rahma) here should be understood from the context as the bestowal of the experience of light. In other words, it is not the technique itself that produces the effect, but it depends entirely on the absolute grace of God, and the only means left to man is simply to "wait". The technique is only preparation.

Likewise, according to Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh, "the remembrance of God Most High is the key to salvation", but only "through the grace of God (Faḍl Allāh), the Generous, the Victorious". Therefore, even if one does not experience the effects of Dhikr while seeking God's help, it is important not to pray mechanically but to persistently continue seeking His assistance. For, as Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh states, "whosoever seeks the help of God but does not see the visible signs of assistance forthcoming should know that his continuous asking for God's help is itself what is being sought from him".<sup>43</sup> This perspective reflects an

Islamic philosophy that emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty and human powerlessness in comparison.

On the other hand, the writings of Pseudo-Symeon and Nicephorus may give the illusion that the experience of grace is somehow attainable through human effort. However, the teachers of Hesychasm firmly believe that such experiences are purely "from above", meaning they are special blessings from God. The experience of the "Light of Tabor" depends entirely on grace and is a privileged gift granted only to those who are worthy of it. The technique of the Jesus Prayer serves only as a "vessel" to prepare oneself, and whether or not content is poured into it belongs to the domain of God's authority. This "relativization" of the effects of the technique and the absolute "grace" of the mystical experience also confirm common elements in both traditions.

### 3.6. Breathing and Posture Techniques

Up to this point, by comparing Ghazālī's and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh's discussions of Dhikr and the techniques of the Jesus Prayer in early Hesychasm, we have analyzed the common elements in both traditions and identified a surprising number of similarities. However, there is one element that is extensively discussed in the Jesus Prayer but is completely absent in the two texts on Dhikr: the elements of "breathing techniques" and "posture techniques", or "psychophysical techniques". Of course, the absence of psychophysical techniques in both texts does not necessarily mean that such techniques did not exist during their time. It is possible that some physical practices existed, but both authors either did not emphasize them or were simply not familiar with them in detail. However, by the 12th century, particularly during the period when poets and scholars such as Sanāī, 'Aṭṭār, and Rūmī flourished in Persia, physical practices like breathing techniques and dances (such as the whirling sema) began to be incorporated into Dhikr.

On the other hand, what is common to the prayer techniques of Pseudo-Symeon and Nicephorus is the testimony of breathing techniques, although there are subtle differences in their methods. The purpose of these bodily movements is to "place the "mind" (nous) in the "heart" (kardia) for the sake of spiritual action. The term "the place of the heart" in Pseudo-Symeon's writings refers to the location where the heart exists, and he advises searching for it "with the inner eye". In other words, the purpose of seeking "the place of the heart" is implied to be to guide the mind there. This idea is, however, explicitly stated in Nicephorus's writings. The portrayal shows the mind being led into the heart from a place separate from the heart, as if the mind were an independent entity. It is also clearly expressed that the mind "settles there".

The concept of leading the mind into the heart is based on the traditional anthropology of Eastern spirituality, which holds that the heart is the essential seat of the mind. Both Pseudo-Symeon and Nicephorus refer to the heart as the "dwelling" or "home" of the mind. However, in the case of Pseudo-Symeon, in addition to breathing techniques, there is also a posture technique—namely, the posture of looking at the navel or the posture of bending forward with the body curled up—to facilitate the mind's entry into the heart. Nicephorus, on the other hand, does not mention this posture technique and focuses solely on breathing techniques. Nevertheless, the purpose remains the same: to bring the mind into the heart for the sake of the Jesus Prayer. When the mind enters and remains in the heart, the Jesus Prayer begins.

On the other hand, in the works of al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh, there is advice and guidance on using Dhikr to focus the heart on Allah and to improve one's approach to God and spiritual states. However, specific descriptions of breathing or posture techniques associated with Dhikr are not present.<sup>44</sup> However, it should be reiterated that the absence of evidence does not necessarily mean that psychophysical techniques did not exist during their time; it simply indicates that no explicit evidence predates their testimony. Similarly, in the Jesus Prayer tradition, there are clear indications of the existence of psychophysical techniques before Pseudo-Symeon and Nicephorus.<sup>45</sup> However, there is no clear evidence.

In both traditions, the origins of such techniques prior to the respective witnesses must rely on the discovery of new sources.

#### 4. Conclusions

The comparison of al-Ghazālī's and Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh's discussions of Dhikr with the two hesychasts' discourses on the Jesus Prayer is valid in the sense that each is rooted in its respective tradition and articulated in words. Through this comparison, we have identified commonalities in the goals pursued by both traditions: the interpretation of inner prayer, unity with God represented through light, and techniques centered around the continuous repetition of the Divine Name (whether vocalized or not).

The difference, however, lies in the absence of any mention of breathing or posture techniques in the two Islamic texts. Furthermore, there is no clear evidence of psychophysical techniques being incorporated into the Jesus Prayer tradition prior to Nicephorus.

The comparison presented here is merely the result of the "conceptualization" of experiences as expressed by practitioners of each meditation method. We have not made any evaluative judgments regarding this conceptualization. When it comes to objectively understanding or evaluating these experiences—particularly the mystical experiences specific to Sufism, such as self-annihilation (*fanā*) through union with God or states of ecstasy—neuroscientific and psychophysiological observations would be required. However, this lies beyond the scope of this study.

Interreligious dialogue should be conducted in the language of religion, but the language of each religion is the "output" of the "mind". This language is, in fact, the crystallization of the conceptualization of religious mystical experiences, which lie at the core of human existence. It is undeniable that there are similarities and resonances in how religious experiences are conceptualized in Hesychasm and Sufism. These serve as points of contact between Christianity and Islam, fostering a deeper understanding between the two traditions.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hesychasm consists of two main aspects: the practical dimension of the monks' prayer practices and the theoretical basis for the legitimacy of these practices. On the practical dimension, see (Hisamatsu 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> The term originally means "path" or "method", but in the Islamic context it usually refers to specific Sufi sects or groups. These groups provide paths or methods to facilitate the spiritual growth and insight of individual Sufis.
- <sup>3</sup> "Unio mystica" refers to the experience in which an individual's soul connects with God and becomes one with the divine presence. Mysticism refers to the belief or practice that seeks direct contact, connection and integration with God or divinity, and is centred on such experiences.
- <sup>4</sup> The following translation is based on the online version of the Qur'an (<https://al-quran.info/#home>, accessed on 1 May 2024) for Qur'anic references.
- <sup>5</sup> For general overviews of Dhikr and Sufi orders, see (Gardet 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> However, it's worth noting that al-Ghazālī, originally a theologian, later embraced Sufism, so he is not as well known as a Sufi. Conversely, his brother Ahmad al-Ghazālī is known as a Sufi thinker, and it is believed that his influence had an impact on his brother's construction of mystical thought.
- <sup>7</sup> Ihyā, III, Book 1, Chapter 8. English translation by Skellie (1899, pp. 74–75). Minor text corrections have been made here and there.
- <sup>8</sup> Rawātib: supererogatory performances of worship which precede and follow the prescribed prayers. Ibid., p. 206.
- <sup>9</sup> Hadīth al-nafs: This is the lightest type of sin, which is not even to be reckoned as sin on the day of Judgment. Ibid, p. 206.
- <sup>10</sup> This is why Louis Gardet (1904–1986), a French Islamic scholar, called this passage "the knowledge-based residue of Dhikr" because it doesn't resonate as vividly as the experiential language of the Sufis. See (Gardet 1952, p. 649).
- <sup>11</sup> See Nakamura 1971, pp. 153–54.

- 12 Ibid.
- 13 The following will refer to this book as “Miftāḥ” for short. The English translation of this book: (Danner-Fadae 1996).
- 14 “From them comes the heart’s rust, which is forgetfulness. By means of the retreat, the invocation, fasting, ritual purity, silence, rejecting wrong thoughts, steadfastness, and oneness of purpose, the mirror of the heart is polished of its rust”. Chapter 6, K. Danner-Fadae, p. 103.
- 15 See id., Chapter 3; 4, Danner-Fadae, p. 80; p. 89.
- 16 See id., Chapter 6, Danner-Fadae, pp. 103–8.
- 17 See id., Chapter 1, Danner-Fadae, pp.68–70.
- 18 Id., Chapter 5, Danner-Fadae, p. 99.
- 19 Sufism emphasizes the connection between the external (physical) and internal (spiritual) dimensions of the individual. This is often framed in terms of spiritual *adab* (etiquette), *akhlaq* (character), and *fiṭrah* (the natural state of purity). In many Sufi works, physical acts like bowing, prostrating, and sitting in a humble manner are viewed as symbolic of and means for purifying the heart and soul.
- 20 See Miftāḥ, Introduction, K. Danner-Fadae, pp. 45–46.
- 21 See id., Chapter 6; 8, K. Danner-Fadae, p. 108; p. 121.
- 22 Among the various phrases in Dhikr, the most well-known is “Allāhu Akbar” (God is Great), which is often recited by Muslims in daily prayers, special occasions and personal meditations. Other phrases include “Subḥānallāh” (Glory to God), “Alḥamdu lillāh” (Praise be to God), and “Lā ilāha illā llāh” (There is no god but God).
- 23 Miftāḥ, Chapter 5, K. Danner-Fadae, p. 98.
- 24 Ibid., p. 100.
- 25 Ibid., p. 101.
- 26 K. Danner-Fadae, p. 29.
- 27 “Rational thinking is the most injurious thing in all retreats” Chapter 6, Danner-Fadae, p. 104.
- 28 See Miftāḥ, Chapter 6; 8, Danner-Fadae, p. 105; pp.123–24.
- 29 Miftāḥ, Chapter 5, Danner-Fadae, p.101.
- 30 Danner-Fadae, p. 249.
- 31 Miftāḥ, Chapter 5, Danner-Fadae, p. 95.
- 32 Id., Chapter 2, Danner-Fadae, p. 73.
- 33 Ibid. p. 76.
- 34 See (Izutsu 1995).
- 35 Id., Chapter 1, Danner-Fadae, p. 69.
- 36 Id., Chapter 1, Danner-Fadae, p. 69.
- 37 Miftāḥ, Introduction, Danner-Fadae, p. 47.
- 38 See (Migne 1875, p. 1221).
- 39 Kephalaia Gnostika Chapter 12 = (Muyldermans 1931, p. 52).
- 40 The Praktikos, Chapter 64 = (Guillaumont and Guillaumont 1971, p. 648).
- 41 The Praktikos, Chapter 64 = (Guillaumont and Guillaumont 1971, p. 648).
- 42 See (Guillaumont 1977, p. 355).
- 43 Miftāḥ, Chapter 3, Danner-Fadae, p. 80
- 44 As mentioned above, in the text of Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh, there is an instruction to adopt a posture of placing one’s head between the knees before one’s master. However, this posture is merely symbolic of humility and submissiveness toward both the master and God, and it is not recommended as a prayer technique in the way found in Hesychasm.
- 45 An illustration in a Greek manuscript (Vatican Gr 1754) from the 11th or 12th century shows an episode of Elijah praying on Mount Carmel. This illustration is considered to be the earliest iconographic evidence of somatic techniques. For further information, see (Meyendorff 1974, pp. 90–91; Ware 1992, pp. 10–11).

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