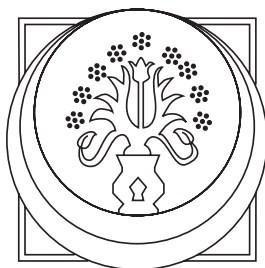
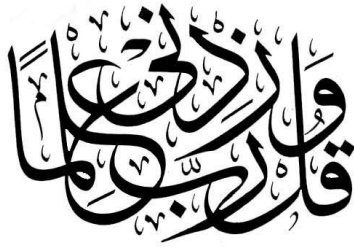


AL-GHAZĀLĪ
Kitāb āfāt al-lisān
THE BANES OF
THE TONGUE
Book 24 of the *Ihyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*
THE REVIVAL OF THE
RELIGIOUS SCIENCES

Introduction by
Kenneth L. Hornerkamp



FONS VITAE
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Say My Lord increase me in Knowledge

Qur'ān 20:114

INTRODUCTION

If you wish for effacement [in God], knock upon the door of remembrance (*dhikr*) as one seeking shelter and in utter need, steadfastly abstain from speech (*ṣamt*) with both peers and others, and pay heed with every breath to the innermost soul (*al-sirr*) over the discourse of the lower self.¹

From the sayings of Abū al-Ḥasan as-Shādhilī (656/1258)

The Baneful of the Tongue (*Kitāb āfāt al-lisān*) is the fourth of the ten books that comprise the Quarter of Perils (*Rubʿ al-muhlikāt*) of *Iḥyāʿ ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*). This book enumerates the misuses of the tongue that constitute fatal character flaws, the essential remedy for which, Imam al-Ghazālī (505/1111) stresses, is *ṣamt*: to refrain from speech. *Ṣamt* is thus treated here as a social ethic or virtue with a salvific dimension, expressed in the oft-cited *ḥadīth*, “Whoever is silent is saved,”² and even as a condition of faith itself: “Let whoever believes in God and the Last Day say what is good or else stay silent (*yaṣmut*).”³

In this book of *al-Iḥyāʿ* Imam al-Ghazālī enumerates twenty banes of the tongue beginning with the least serious to the most egregious, citing, for example, excessive speech, lying, backbiting, scandalmongering, ostentation, hypocrisy, obscenity, arguing, self-justification, disputation, excess, vain talk, distortion and exposing the faults of others. In doing this, his focus is mainly on speech that gives rise to distress and suffering, either in this world or the Next, all of which should therefore be avoided. As for his sources besides the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, al-Ghazālī relies heavily on an earlier work by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (281/894) entitled *Kitāb al-ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān* (*The Book of Silence and Proprieties of the Tongue*) which treats *ṣamt* as an essential element for journeying upon the path to purification of the lower-self and for being granted the intimate knowledge of the Divine which may ensue. For this reason,

1 Cited in Ibn ʿAyyād, *al-Mafākhīr al-ʿiliyya*, page 50.

2 Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 2410, al-Nasāʾī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 11425, and in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 38.

3 Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ṣamt wa ādāb al-lisān*, 27.

all the classic manuals of Sufism dedicate a chapter to *ṣamt* as an active principle and a practice of Sufism in and of itself, summed up best in the words of the Greatest Master, Ibn ʿArabī al-Ḥātimī (d. 638/1240): “Silence bequeaths gnosis (*al-ṣamt yūrithu maʿrifat Allāh*).”⁴

In *The Banēs of the Tongue*, Imam al-Ghazālī does not ignore the integral relationship of *ṣamt* with the heart and spiritual journeying – in one instance he cites the *ḥadīth*, “The believer is someone whose silence is reflection (*tafakkur*), whose gaze is contemplation (*ʿibra*), and whose speech is invocation (*dhikr*)”⁵ – but his main focus throughout is on defining the fatal flaws of character that arise from the misuse of speech, then presenting their causes as well as advice on how to avoid and overcome them. Thus, for example, in respect to *ṣamt* as a means for rectifying the sin of backbiting, he provides multiple insights into the nature of the lower-soul (*nafs*), and concludes, “And if the servant does not find (this) fault in his own soul, let him give thanks to God ﷻ and not sully himself with the worst of faults which is to defame people and eat dead flesh. But if he were to truly judge his own soul, he would know that if he supposes himself innocent of every fault, then he is ignorant of his own soul, and that in itself is one of the worst of faults.”⁶

The treatment of *ṣamt*, however, as an active principle of the Sufi path of knowledge tended to remain within the domain of Sufi teachings as passed down by the mentors and heirs of that tradition who came before and after Imam al-Ghazālī. In an effort to cast some light on the nature of this teaching and the manner in which the mentors of the path saw it as a key to their spiritual heritage, I will cite a selection of *ḥadīths* from Ibn Abī al-Dunyā’s *Kitāb al-ṣamt* referred to in the first section of *The Banēs of the Tongue*, then move on to examples from the *Risālat al-Qushayrīya* of ʿAbd al-Karīm, al-Qushayrī (465/1072), and conclude with a short selection from Ibn ʿArabī’s *Kitāb ḥilyatu al-abdāl* (*The Adornment of the Substitutes*) in which he describes and places *ṣamt* as one of the four active elements of the Sufi way, along with solitude (*ʿuzlah*), hunger (*jūʿ*), and keeping night vigils (*sahar*).

Imam al-Ghazālī opens *The Banēs of the Tongue* by concisely treating the merits of silence in general and warns that the perils of the tongue

4 Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn ʿArabī, “Ḥilyat al-abdāl,” in *Rasāil Ibn ʿArabī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Namrī (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmīyah, 2001), ...

5 *Iḥyā ʿulūm al-dīn*, vol. 5, p. 404. Ibn Asakir narrates a similar saying from Abū Ḥāzim Salmah ibn Dīnār al-Aʿraj al-Zāhid in *Tarikh Madīnat Dimashq*, Beirut: 1995, vol. 22, p. 63.

6 *Iḥyā ʿulūm al-dīn*, vol. 5, p. 527.

are many and the sole means of deliverance from them is silence, citing the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ, “Whoever is silent is saved,”⁷ and “Silence is wisdom but few are they who practice it.”⁸ He alludes to the close relationship between salvation and wisdom with faith and the heart of the servant, citing a *ḥadīth* related by Anas b. Mālik, from the Prophet ﷺ, “The faith of the servant will not be upright until his heart is upright, and his heart will not be upright until his tongue is, and no man shall enter paradise whose neighbor is not safe from his harm.”⁹ Another facet of refraining from speech is reflected in a *ḥadīth* related by Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal, who said, “I said, ‘O Messenger of God, are we taken to account for what we say?’ He answered, ‘O son of Jabal! Would that your mother had not been burdened by you! Are people cast on to their noses into hell for anything other than the consequences of their tongues?’”¹⁰ He concludes this section with a summary that brings together the inward and outward merits of *ṣamt* saying, “[Silence] also allows one to collect his concerns and maintain his dignity, to have time for reflection, worship, and invocation, to be safe from the consequences of following all that is said about this world, and from its reckoning in the Next, for as God ﷻ says, (A human being) utters no word except that with him is an observer prepared (to record) [Q 50:18].”¹¹ He ends his opening chapter without having elucidated in detail the role of *ṣamt* as a condition and foundational element of a sound heart (*qalb salīm*). ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه, however, in his advice to Aḥnāf ibn Qays,¹² delineated in detail the stages by which a lack of restraint in speech leads to the death of the heart: “O Aḥnāf, one who laughs much, his esteem (*hayba*) diminishes, one who jokes (*nazaḥa*) is taken lightly, one who does something often becomes known for it, one whose speech increases, his mistakes increase, one whose mistakes increase, his shame (*ḥayā*) diminishes, and one whose shame diminishes, his piety (*wara*) decreases, and whoever’s piety decreases, his heart dies.” This is the same al-Aḥnāf ibn Qays about whom al-Ḥasan said, “People were addressing one another in the presence of Mu‘āwiya, while al-Aḥnāf ibn Qays remained silent. They

7 Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 2501.

8 Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 5:169.

9 Aḥmad, *al-Musnad*, 3:198 and Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ṣamt wa adāb al-lisān*, 9.

10 Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ṣamt wa adāb al-lisān*, 6.

11 *Iḥyā ‘ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 5, p. 402.

12 Al-Aḥnāf ibn Qays was commander of Muslim forces in early Islam, lived to see the *Fitna* and the caliphate of Mu‘āwiya. He died in Kufa at the age of seventy.

asked him, “O Abū Baḥr, what is wrong with you that you are not speaking?” He answered, “I fear God if I lie, and I fear you if I tell the truth.”¹³

Umar’s counsel reflects the essential nature of *ṣamt* to the heart’s wellbeing and as an active element of the perfection of faith and the interior life of the servant. For this reason, all the early compendiums of Sufism contain a chapter dedicated to *ṣamt* as a foundational facet of the path to knowledge of God and Divine reality. In his *Risālat*, al-Qushayrī provides multiple insights into the role of *ṣamt* as described by the mentors of the path. Important to the discussion at hand is this passage which differentiates *ṣamt* into ascending degrees: “It is said that the *ṣamt* of the generality (*ʿawām*) is with their tongues, the *ṣamt* of the gnostics is with their hearts, and the *ṣamt* of the lovers is in protecting their innermost souls from distracting thoughts.”¹⁴ He also distinguishes between inward and outward *ṣamt* saying, “How great is the distance between a servant who remains silent to protect himself from lies and calumny, and the servant who remains silent because he is overwhelmed by awe of the Divine.”¹⁵ At the same time, he clarifies the role of each within the context of spiritual striving, saying, “Silence is of two types: outward silence and silence of the heart and mind. The one who places his trust in God alone (*al-mutawakkil*) is silent about his provision, while the gnostic is silent because his heart is in accord with divine decree. The former trusts in the beauty of what God creates for him, while the latter is satisfied with all that God decrees, or as they say:

Divine decrees flow over you while your innermost soul is
at peace.”¹⁶

Al-Qushayrī completes his introductory comments to this chapter with an overview of the centrality of refraining from speech, calling it a cornerstone of the wisdom of journeying through the various stages of the Path, and differentiating it from the ascetic self-discipline of remaining silent, saying, “it is one of the cornerstones (*arkān*) of striving and the refinement of character.”¹⁷

Nearly 150 years after Qushayrī’s *Epistle on Sufism*, we find Ibn al-ʿArabī (638/1240), the Greatest Master (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), dedicating

13 Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ṣamt wa adāb al-lisān*, 62.

14 ʿAbd al-Karīm, al-Qushayrī, *Risālat al-Qushayriyya*, Bab al-Ṣamt, 346.

15 *Risālat al-Qushayriyya*, 341.

16 *Risālat al-Qushayriyya*, 341- 342.

17 *Risālat al-Qushayriyya*, 342.

a treatise that he composed in Tā'if entitled *Hilyat al-abdāl* to the four principles of the Path mentioned earlier, the first of which he considers to be *ṣamt*. He cites an extraordinary encounter related to him by ʿAbd al-Majīd b. Salama, in Andalusia. ʿAbd al-Majīd told him that during his night vigil a mysterious visitor came to him in his prayer niche whom he recognized as one of the *abdāl*¹⁸ whom he then asked, “O dear sir, by what means do the *abdāl* become *abdāl*?” to which the visitor replied, “By the four things that Abū Ṭālib mentioned in *al-Qūt*:¹⁹ refraining from speech (*ṣamt*), solitude (*ʿuzlah*), hunger (*jūʿ*), and keeping vigils at night (*sahar*).” Ibn al-ʿArabī then adds, “The four things that this man mentioned are the pillars of the Lofty Path and its foundations, and whoever has no part of them, either small or profound, is wandering from the Path of God Most High.... May God make us and you among those who realize them and are granted constancy in them. Verily, He is the One Able to do that.” Then he begins by his explanation of *ṣamt*, saying:

[It] is of two types: *ṣamt* of the tongue is to refrain altogether from speaking without God and with anyone other than God, and *ṣamt* of the heart is to refrain from thoughts that arise from the lower-self concerning anything in creation. So whoever’s tongue is silent but heart is not, his burden (of sin) is lightened. Whoever’s tongue and heart both are silent cleanses his innermost soul and his Lord will reveal Himself to him. Whoever’s heart is silent but whose tongue is not will speak with wisdom. And whoever is silent neither with his tongue nor with his heart has become a kingdom for Satan and the object of his mockery. Thus, silence of the tongue is a trait both of the generality and the people of the way, and silence of the heart is a trait of those brought near to God (*muqarrabīn*), those witnessing the Divinity. Silence of the tongue imparts peace and safety from

18 A group of living persons called *abdāl* (sing. *badal*), literally, “the Substitutes,” variously numbered at four, seven, 40, or 70, who form an essential part of Sufi cosmological hierarchy. These Friends of God are divinely chosen to communicate blessings and mediate wonders in post-prophetic ages. Members of the larger group of substitutes are further distinguished as authentic ones (*ṣiddīqīn*), supports, and poles. Some authors argue that the number of substitutes – whose identity at any one time is known only to very few people – remains constant, since when one of them dies, another “substitutes” for him. John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism*, Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2005, 229.

19 Abū Ṭālib al-Mekki (386/996), *Qūt al-qulūb fī muʿāmalat al-maḥbūb wa waṣf tariq al-murīd ilā maqām al-tawhīd*, or *The Sustenance of Hearts*.

affliction; silence of the heart imparts communion with the Divine and intimacy.

For someone steadfast in *ṣamt* in all his states, there remains only discourse with his Lord. This is because refraining from speech altogether is an impossibility, but when someone turns from discourse with other-than-God (*maʿa ghayr Allāh*) to discourse with his Lord, he is redeemed, brought near, and supported in his speech. When he speaks, what he says is correct, for he speaks by God, Most Exalted, Who said of His Prophet ﷺ, *Nor does he speak by his own whims*. [Q 53:3]. Truthful speech results from refraining from errors, and discourse with what is other-than-God is an error in every circumstance, while discourse about what is other-than-God is malicious in every context. It is to this (sort of speech) that the Words of God ﷻ refer, *There is no good in most of their secret talks—except those encouraging charity, kindness, or reconciliation between people* [Q 4:114]. Finalizing its conditions, God ﷻ says, *They were only commanded to worship Allah alone with sincere devotion to Him* [Q 98: 5]. The spiritual state (*ḥāl*) of *ṣamt* is the station of inspiration (*maqām al-waḥī*) in all its various forms; silence bequeaths gnosis.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's account of the centrality of the role of *ṣamt* to Islamic spirituality will be reiterated soon after him in the teachings of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (656/1258), founder of one of the earliest and most widespread Sufi brotherhoods. Al-Shādhilī encourages his students to apply *ṣamt* as a daily practice. As he is recorded to have said, “Let your main concern be three things: the return to God, awareness of God, and vigilance; and strengthen these with three things: remembrance, seeking forgiveness, and silence, offered as servanthood for God ﷻ; and safeguard these six with four other things: love, contentment, detachment and trust.”²⁰ The Shādhilī path is sometimes known as the “Path of Love,” and indeed Imām as-Shādhilī portrays *ṣamt* as a characteristic of one who loves God (*al-muḥibb*): “The attributes of the Lover are perseverance in contemplation, abundant invocation, a lack of excess in physical acts of worship, and constant restraint of the tongue. He neither fears nor hopes. If he is beckoned, he hears not, and when he looks about, he sees not.”²¹

These quotes from two of Islam's most recognized mentors of the

20 Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, *Risālat al-qaṣd ilā Allāh*, folio 53/z.

21 Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, *Risālat al-amīn fī al-wuṣūl li rabb al-ʿālamīn*, page 53. The meaning of these last two sentences is that he has neither fear nor hope vis a vis creatures, and if something in creation beckons him or demands to be seen, he pays it no heed.

Sufi path highlight the relevance of the central theme of *The Banes of the Tongue*, *ṣamt*, as an active principle of Islamic spirituality, in theory and practice, to the point where it became integrated into the normative comportment of Islamic culture itself. Any discussion of *ṣamt* will at the same time bring into sharp relief the dilemma of our modern context with its culture of social media, a culture that has come to represent the antithesis of the value of *ṣamt*. Herein may lie the most relevant aspect of *The Banes of the Tongue* to today's reader.

The importance of this book of *Ihyā* could not be any greater today than it was almost a thousand years ago in the days of Imam al-Ghazālī. In his day, the banes enumerated in this book occurred more or less either in discourse between individuals in discrete social or demographic settings or within defined circles of either the scholarly or ruling elite. All, however, took place in an ambience in which the participants knew one another and had a shared heritage, a communal awareness of what constituted salutary action (*al-adab*) that englobed and established norms that transcended any specific social context and were recognized by each member of the group as a facet of their shared humanity and identity. For Imam al-Ghazālī, this heritage was embodied in the universal principles of the Qurʾān and the example of the Prophet ﷺ, as is well testified to in the text before us. The relevance of *The Banes of the Tongue* is that it served and serves as a reminder of this shared heritage and the values that bind us to the human state and assure us of a certain respect whoever we may be. From an Islamic perspective, “we are all servants of God.” In the age of modernity there is a tendency to forget, to some degree, this awareness, and our ‘discrete identity’ overcomes our awareness of our ‘social identity.’

This rupture is no more glaringly evident in the day to day interactions we observe in the context of social media which in its most egregious forms takes place in an atmosphere of anonymity. Anonymity is the result of a rupture in our identity, a forgetfulness that has become a characteristic of our time, the social implications of which we are clearly warned about in the Qurʾān: “*And do not be like those who forgot God, so He made them forget themselves.*” [Q 59:19]. In the introduction to his translation of Shaykh Ahmad al-ʿAlawī's commentary on chapter fifty-three of the Qurʾān, *The Star (al-Najm)*, J.J. González calls our attention to the spiritual crisis confronting humanity in the age of modernity: “This caution from the Qurʾān distinguishes between two degrees of forgetting: the forgetting of God and the forgetting of one's self. Although the first is the cause of the second, it is the last that engenders the gravest

and most definitive consequences, for it consists of an essential forgetfulness that produces a rupture between the human being and his/her origin and very significance. This is the forgetfulness that in our times is impacting an ever-growing number of people.”²²

Such a contextualization of forgetfulness helps to explain the absolute incapacity of this age to respond to the questions and prerequisites of the human condition that in the end we have put aside and replaced with a state of permanent agitation, frantic and artificial, which is the product of the permanent flux of illusions that never satisfy and a life of endless change and permutation. All of this finds its most overt expression in human discourse, and in particular on the individual level in the niche of social media itself. Studying and engaging oneself in the essential themes of *The Banes of the Tongue* is therefore a rare opportunity to remember and take account of our shared human heritage as well as a means of addressing a crisis that is too often seen as the inevitable result of modern times and a loss of any clear concept of who we are.

The above discussion of *ṣamt* within the Sufi tradition has hopefully provided insight into its essential role as an active element of the path, a solution to forgetfulness, and a key to seeing our own present challenges from a new perspective. The Prophet’s words ﷺ, “The believer is someone whose silence is reflection (*tafakkur*), whose gaze is contemplation (*‘ibra*), and whose speech is invocation (*dhikr*),”²³ and “*Ṣamt* is the Lord (*sayyid*) of laudable character,”²⁴ speak eloquently to this point. It has been a central theme of this brief introduction to help the reader understand *The Banes of the Tongue* in the context of our identity crisis, not as a book of Islamic etiquette or Muslim version of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Let it not be supposed however that the relevance of *The Banes of the Tongue* is limited to any particular time or place. The modern attitudes mentioned above are as pervasive within every context and culture as any other. Although *ṣamt* is perceived as playing a key social role within Islamic society today, for example, one too often notices that *ṣamt* and the themes addressed by Imam al-Ghazali in this chapter of *Iḥyā* are perceived from within a context of social etiquette rather than as keys that address the essential forgetfulness that produces

22 Ahmad al-‘Alawī, *De La Révélation: Commentaire Ésotérique de al sourate al-Étoile*, Trans. M. Chabry et J.J. González (Éd. Entrelacs: Paris, 2011), 9.

23 *Iḥyā ‘ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 5, p. 404. Ibn Asakir narrates a similar saying from Abū Hāzim Salmah ibn Dīnār al-A‘raj al-Zāhid in *Tarikh Madīnat Dimashq*, Beirut: 1995, vol. 22, p. 63.

24 Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ṣamt wa adāb al-lisān*, 62.

a rupture between the human being and his/her origins.

In summary, this translation of *The Banes of the Tongue* will serve as an oft-cited primary tool for researchers engaged in Islamic values as well as in the domains of social psychology and emotional intelligence. It is therefore as welcome an addition to the upper-division Islamic studies classroom, as it is to graduate seminars that focus on Islam social identity. The discourse of this work however extends beyond the realm of the scholar of Islam or social-anthropology; anyone committed to the study of the science the human soul and its states and the manner in which they resonate within a given social milieu will find in this work new insights. Beyond academics, this work offers both the Arabic and the non-Arabic speaking Muslim community a treasure trove of the traditional wisdom teachings of Islam and the social values that define its character. Let me add here, for young and old; for as universally applicable as this text is its appeal goes beyond any generational perspectives. The benefits of this translation exceed the bounds of any particular religious, intellectual, or academic orientation. To anyone who gives this book the time it merits there are multiple benefits, among them the opportunity to expand one's horizons and know more about themselves.

Kenneth L. Honerkamp

University of Georgia at Athens

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KENNETH LEE HONERKAMP, a graduate of the Quarawiyyine University of Morocco and the University of Aix-en-Provence, France has worked extensively in the manuscript libraries of Morocco. His research interests lie in the fields of teacher/disciple relationships in formative Sufism and the study and translation of letters of spiritual guidance written by Moroccan Sufis. He is also interested in the area of formative Sufism and has edited and translated several previously unpublished works of Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412/1021). His critical edition of the *Rasa’il al-kubra* of Ibn Abbad of Ronda (d. 792/1390) and other of his works are in print. He presently holds the position of professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Georgia at Athens.

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Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk

Abdurrahman Fitzgerald

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