

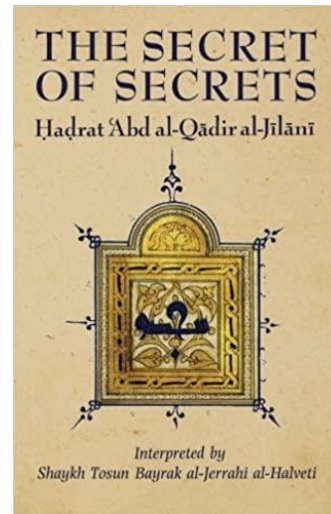
‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī. *The Secret of Secrets*. Translated by Shaykh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992. Pp. xlix+123. Paperback. ISBN: 978 0946621 29 3.

*The Secret of Secrets* is an interpretative translation of a renowned Muslim Sufi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī’s (1077–1166 CE) original, *Sirr al-Asrār*. *The Secret of Secrets* was published in 1992 and is the first English translation of one of the remarkable Sufi contributions of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī.

‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, the founder of the Qādiriyyah Sufi order, was an expert in Islamic law of Shāfi‘ī and Ḥanbalī schools. He was deeply grounded in Islamic religious tradition merging both law and Sufism. Tosun Bayrak (1926–2018), the translator, belongs to what is called a modern-day Turkey and is famous for his translations of works of Sufis such as Yaḥyā b. Ḥabash al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191 CE), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE), and Muḥammad Birgivī (d. 1573).

The author gives us a glimpse of Sufi works of the eleventh/twelfth century, having an esoteric (*bāṭinī*) approach towards the Qur’ānic interpretation during the Golden Age of Islam and emphasizes the inner meanings of the Qur’ān and ritual practices. He uses Qur’ānic verses, Prophetic sayings, and Divine Names throughout the book and interprets them in a way that uncovers the hidden truths in those verses and sayings. Therefore, this book helps to understand what Sufi thoughts, practices, and ideals looked like during the eleventh/twelfth-century Sufism. Moreover, the author relied less on explaining Sufi stories and narratives of his time. Instead, he discussed the Sufi ideals, symbols, and concepts in a descriptive manner using the Qur’ānic and Prophetic symbols which fascinate a modern reader even more.

*The Secret of Secrets* provides a comprehensive explanation of how the secret of secrets is known, understood, practiced, and manifested. The author’s insights into man’s inner experiences, the manifestation of God’s attributes, and yearning to meet the Beloved ensure that such an explanation can only be given by someone who has been through those



cultivation practices already. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī thoroughly amalgamates various Sufi concepts about God’s existence and man’s nothingness, heart’s eye and heart’s heart, body and soul, outer and inner aspects of Islamic rituals, the manifestation of God’s attributes, and the essence of worship for people who truly want to experience the Beloved. Simply put, the book explains the processes and miracles through which one attains and manifests truth. Thus, the secret of secrets is about knowing those inner realities while fully experiencing God’s Will, delving into the inner meanings of ritual practices, and manifesting God’s attributes and essence.

In the introduction of the book, the author provides a profound background that tells the reader what kind of eye and lens are required to fully understand the book and its arguments. For instance, he talks about different souls, intellects, levels of wisdom, man’s origin, heart’s eye, the symbolism of light, and inner and outer practices. Thus, after reading the introduction, it becomes easier for the reader to understand various Sufi symbols and concepts that the author uses throughout the book.

The topical distribution of the book is organized in a unique sense. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī starts with man’s origin and descent to this earth while giving it a spiritual perspective. He then moves on to explain the purpose of man’s creation from doing physical worship to remembering God internally without being concerned about time and space, from how to polish souls initially by avoiding lusts and desires to reaching the pinnacle of nothingness and experiencing Him fully—all these aspects of man’s existence, creation, and actions are explained thoroughly.

‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī’s categorization of souls, wisdom, and intellects into different levels makes it easier to understand these complex terms with their spiritual connotations. For instance, he explains three categories of souls (i.e., human, moving, and sultan). The human soul is involved in worldly practices and physical worship. The moving soul is angelic and related to acts of remembering God and manifesting His attributes. The sultan soul, the best of them, can experience the essence of God and only a few people can attain it. This is the stage where miracles happen and where truths are revealed and *kashf* (unveiling) unfolds. According to the author, one should be extremely cautious about revealing those secrets to others since they are only a start to the spiritual journey and many secrets are awaited to be unveiled after that. Therefore, silence, humility, and patience are the virtues that must be essentialized by a spiritual seeker from the beginning.

In terms of contrasting the ritual/outer/worldly nature of worship from the spiritual/inner/transcendental nature of doing *dhikr* (remembrance), offering prayers, fasting, giving charity, and making the pilgrimage, the author delves into the real essence and secret behind these worship practices. For instance, he says that the secret of *dhikr* refers to remembering God all the time internally not just verbally at a specific time and place. The secret of *ṣalāh* is experiencing God and talking directly to Him during prayers instead of merely performing the bodily actions. The secret of fasting is doing what is lawful and not even thinking about what is unlawful until the last breath instead of being restrictive only during Ramaḍān. The secret of charity is doing good deeds so that others can be saved on the Day of Judgement instead of only helping others financially. The secret of pilgrimage is doing *dhikr* and mentioning Allah's attributes to see the Ka'bah in one's heart instead of physically performing Ḥajj. In short, the heart is the centre where all these secrets happen, where *ṣalāh* can be offered without being restricted to time and place, where fasting remains eternal, where charity becomes spiritual, and where going within one's heart is similar to going to Mecca. For these reasons, the author says, "For the devout walk to paradise while the wise fly to the realms close to their Lord" (p. 16). Therefore, wise seekers are more concerned about developing a deeper relationship with God and experiencing Him fully instead of only aiming for Paradise.

I find the two dimensions, outer and inner, of thinking about all worship practices deeply moving. We can implement the same in all aspects of our lives. All actions we perform have a physical or materialistic realm while at the same time a spiritual reality is also present. For instance, if I help one of my friends financially, the outer dimension is to help since he is my friend and we have been friends for years and I do not want him to suffer. The inner dimension is that I give the money thinking it was never mine in the first place. It was God's and He gave it to me, and I am being tested through it. The author wants us to cultivate such thinking and realization so that we form the spiritual element in all worship practices and other aspects of our lives.

'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī uses the Sufi ideals of nothingness and non-existence as human perfection. The perfection that a Sufi strives for is related to the complete absence of oneself and the negation of one's very existence. According to this understanding, one should be immersed in seeking God's love such that one does not remain conscious of one's own life, lusts, desires, and other distractions. The rationale behind this thought is that only God is the real existence, while all that we do and

perform in this world is the manifestation of His Names. This is a remarkable Sufi concept that makes one understand and cautious about life and builds God-consciousness in the spiritual seeker. The author discusses specific God's attributes which should be remembered and recited by tongue until they automatically start repeating themselves through the heart. The specific twelve names of Allah that he mentions are: *Lā ilāha illā Allāh* (there is no god but Allah), *Allāh* (the proper name of God), *Huwa* (the transcendent Allah), *Ḥaqq* (the Truth), *Ḥayy* (the ever-living divine Life), *Qayyūm* (the Self-existing One upon Whom all existence depends), *Qahhār* (the All-compeller Who overwhelms all), *Wahhāb* (the limitless Donor of all), *Fattāh* (the Opener), *Wāḥid* (the One), *Aḥad* (the Unique), and *Ṣamad* (the Source) (p. 77). In this manner, the book also covers questions related to the reality of existence and the manifestation of God's attributes in His creation. The author quotes the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) saying, "Adorn yourself with the divine disposition" (p. 78). "Divine disposition" here refers to manifesting God's truth completely. Moreover, he mentions, "Allah says through His Prophet (PBUH), 'When I love My servant I become his eyes, his ears, his tongue, and his feet. He sees through Me, he hears through Me, he speaks in My name, his hands become Mine and he walks with Me'" (p. 42). One fully experiences God at this stage and this is the pinnacle of one's spiritual journey which Sufis strive for throughout their lives. This *ḥadīth* is interesting because it shows the author's explanation of Sufi symbols and ideals using Prophetic sayings and a *ḥadīth qudsī* (God speaking through a human source). This is also a great reminder to debunk the problematic idea of Sufism and Sufi practices being grounded in outside of the Islamic tradition.

'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī quotes verses from the Qur'ān and Prophetic sayings, throughout his book, to support his major argument about explaining how and why knowing and experiencing the secret is essential. Moreover, he talks about God's Hands, Face, or Light mentioned in the Qur'ān, and symbolically explains these verses, as we are unable to imagine God's physical attributes. It is crucial to understand that he uses such verses so that man can make some sense of how God presents Himself in the Qur'ān. The true lovers are always curious to deeply understand the Beloved and it is in man's nature to explore how the Beloved looks like, therefore, these verses provide some clue to those spiritual seekers. So, all arguments he makes related to God's worship, attributes, remembrance, contemplation, and outer and inner aspects of *'ibādah* (worship) are originated in the Qur'ān and Prophetic sayings.

Subsequently, the author explains the word *taṣawwuf* (mysticism) that has four consonant letters. “T” stands for *tawbah* (repentance), “ṣ” stands for *ṣafā’* (joy), “w” stands for *wilāyah* (friendship), and “f” stands for *fanā’* (annihilation). Thus, Sufis start their spiritual journey by repenting to God so that their sins be forgiven. This brings joy to them as they start exploring their inner selves, and thus, they become friends of God. Finally, they reach a stage where they are fully annihilated from this world and experience spiritual truth eventually.

Despite having worldly, timely, and geographical differences, there is a reason for which I reviewed this classical gem and Bayrak translated it. The reason is that the Divine Truth never changes. The ways to attain God will remain the same no matter how different the outer world looks like. The inner world will always remain within the heart, and more perfectly within the heart’s heart because that is where God resides. Thus, to understand and experience these inner secrets, this book is a phenomenal explanation of unveiling inner realities.

Overall, I think it is an overwhelming attempt by the author and the translator, beautifully organized while thoroughly explaining essential Sufi symbols and ideals, to elaborate spiritual teachings to modern people in English, hence making Classical Islamic works more accessible to modern people who are in dire need of spiritual cultivation. I am also enthralled by the wholesome theoretical and practical approach of the book which not only explains Sufi concepts in detail but also discusses pragmatic ways to achieve that theoretical perfection.

Moreover, I think the book’s translation can be improved by making two small additions. Firstly, adding Arabic verses from the Qur’ān and Prophetic sayings while giving original text flavour would have been more aesthetically pleasing for the reader instead of merely providing the English translation. Secondly, I think some of the terms used in the book might need more clarification for readers that are not well versed in understanding spiritual aspects of worship or Sufi terminologies, so a glossary for those terms would have been more helpful.

To conclude, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī’s exposition of inner secrets using Qur’ānic verses and Prophetic sayings is an insightful and thorough explanation of various Sufi symbols and ideals. This book is a wonderful gift to humanity because it explains inner truth so fully, aesthetically, intelligently, and comprehensively. According to this book, the truth can be achieved, and inner secrets can be known through repentance, contemplation, God-consciousness, and a complete manifestation of God’s attributes. We live in a deeply materialistic world and, therefore, are obsessed with our bodies, beauty, wealth, status,

power, and money. Therefore, this book is still relevant than ever as it provides us with ways to understand and apply spiritual cultivation practices. The author condemns all these evils in this book and explains why they are a distraction and damage to our souls. This book teaches us to focus on the inner aspects of worship activities and tells us that the true power lies in achieving nothingness, the true wealth is to have spiritual richness, and the true beauty is to have a cleansed heart.

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