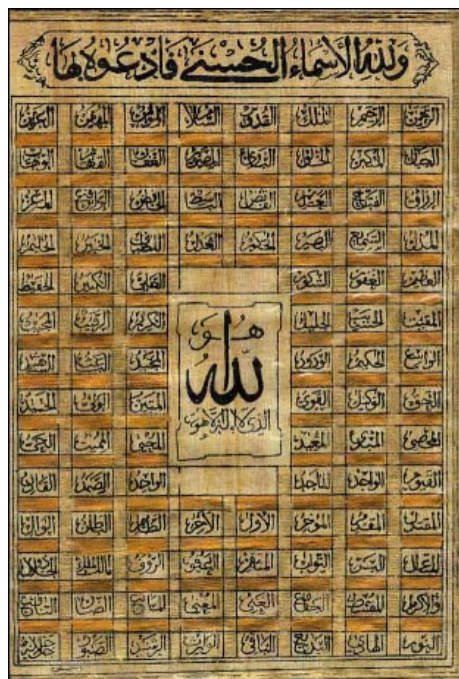


The 99 Beautiful Names of God – An Introduction by Amir O'Loughlin

Dear Friends

This first posting for the study of the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah is an introduction to the overall subject of the “Asma al-husna”. Each future edition will cover a handful of the Names, and I will be including a sound file of each grouping recited by a female voice (Seemi Ghazi, University of British Columbia Arabic professor and a senior teacher in the Rifai-Marufi Order), and a male voice (Pir Zia Inayat Khan, the Pir of the Sufi Order International and a language scholar in his own right). Each edition will be sent in a MSWord file as well as a copy in .pdf format. If your computer reads Word files well, you will find there the most accurate colour and formatting rendition.



This is not intended at all to be a comprehensive course on the subject – that would be a far more ambitious undertaking. The 99 Names can be the object of a lifetime's study, and many books' worth of commentary cannot even hope to cover the infinite nuances of the Divine attributes. I will endeavor to give you, kind reader, a very brief introduction today, and then proceed in the next posting to offer the first in the series of essays on the 99 Names of God.

My own commentary will be in this font, and I will try to make it obvious via font or comment when there is a switch to an excerpt from someone else.

I do not consider myself an expert on this subject, but will offer a little of my knowledge which I have gleaned from my years of study with many Sufi teachers. Amongst others, I would like to acknowledge Murshid Shahabuddin Less, Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, Pir Zia Inayat Khan and Sheikh Sherif Baba Çatalkaya for their guidance and inspiration.

I will no doubt be making errors often, which I will endeavor to correct when help arrives from those who know more than I do. I will also do much copying and pasting from the many resources on the Internet on our subject, as well as quoting liberally from my favourite books on the Names:

The Most Beautiful Names Compiled and commented on by Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi al-Halveti

Al-Ghazali: the 99 Beautiful Names of God translated with notes by David Burrell and Nazih Daher

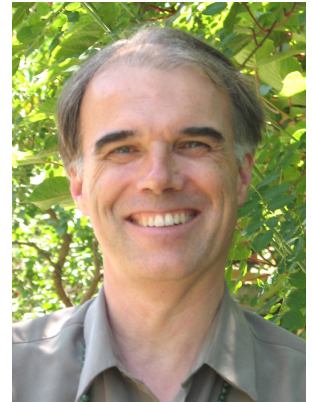
The Sufi Book of Life- 99 Pathways of the Heart for the Modern Dervish by Neil Douglas-Klotz

Asma'ul-Husna – The 99 Beautiful Names of Allah by His Holiness M.R. Bazwa Muhaiyaddeen

In addition to the above resources and other books, I would like to send out a special acknowledgment to my friend Wahiduddin and the wonderful storehouse of information at www.wahiduddin.net, a website which I shall be liberally mining in service of these teachings. You will find there a veritable treasure-trove of Hazrat Inayat Khan and other Sufi teachings.

It is my sincere hope that you enjoy the e-course that I am offering. If you find yourself grateful for the teachings (Ya Shakur), there are two ways that you can show your appreciation. One is to kindly stay in touch with me, with your feedback, commentary, questions, clarifications, etc. The other is to make a donation to either the Sufi Order International (Paypal button at www.sufiorder.org) or provide support for Sheikh Sherif Baba, who is presently in Istanbul and experiencing financial hardship (Paypal donations to mefahir@aol.com). Please mention “Amir’s 99 Names course” when making a donation.

Blessings, Amir O’Loughlin in Vancouver, BC Canada



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Introduction to the asma al-husna

When we speak of the “99 Names of God”, we should begin by stating what is self-evident: there are many more names for the Divine Being than 99! Each culture, each faith, each spiritual tradition generates a myriad of signposts, representations and words for God. In the pantheistic traditions, each of the gods and goddesses themselves are Names of God. In the ‘Sri Lalita Sahasranama,’ there are 1000 Names for the Divine Goddess alone. Dionysius the Areopagite wrote a Christian treatise on the many Names for

God in the Judeo-Christian tradition. An internet search on “names of God” will lead those curious to many more examples from the world’s cultural and religious history.

The poets also have their way of finding endless ways to identify the Divine Being, rendering God’s name in poetic code, such as can be found in Persian mystical poetry (“the curl of the Beloved”, “the Friend” amongst many).

The subject of our course however is a traditional list found in the faith of Islam, as well as the path of ‘tasawwuf’ or ‘Sufism.’ The origins of the idea of ‘99’ Names is the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) who is quoted in a famous hadith:

Verily, there are ninety-nine beautiful names of God, one hundred minus one. The one who enumerates [and believes in them and the one God behind] enters into Paradise.

Most interpretations of the one-hundredth name is that it is reserved for the ‘supreme’ name of God – Allah. There are some Shi’a followers however who believe that the 100th Name will be given in a future time of revelation by the being of ‘Mehdi.’

In another hadith, he is said to have taught:

اهلك من سحلا كئى افس أب كوعدا ين! مهلا

"O Allah, I invoke You with all of Your Beautiful Names."



Commentators point out that the hadiths do not indicate that there are ‘only’ 99 Names, but rather that there are 99 ‘beautiful’ Names that are better than others. This motivated early Muslims to search them out in the Qur’an and Sunnah (the records of the sayings and habits of the prophet). Lists were compiled and ultimately evolved into the now classic version of the list that we will be using for the course (see attachment). However, the search for the 99 Names that the prophet might have referred to is open to ongoing speculation and interpretation; no list of the asma al-husna can be considered final or static.

Sa'adi Neil Douglas Klotz points out that the Names are not static – they are pathways, dynamic forces which have momentum in our being and can be developed, evolved, shaped somewhat, as they are in the manifested Universe. As we begin to step on each of these pathways, let us remember that no path reveals itself with one step, or even one traversing. There are endless layers and subtleties to be discovered when they are worked with.



In Al-Ghazali's teachings on the asma, he touches on another kind of multidimensionality. He implores us to consider the distinctions between name, naming and the thing named.

The 'name', he says, can never encompass the thing named. 'Amir' is a name but does not contain all of Amir-ness. The 'named' in the asma al-husna's list is God. The One who is posited by a name is 'indicated' by the name. It is a signpost. And the 'namer' who does the naming is the one who recites the Name. Al-Ghazali then alludes to the 'activity' of the process of recitation, likening it to motion: "moving, mover and moved." In a concrete analogy, one can use the example of the force of moving a piece of furniture, the mover who does the moving and the furniture being moved. Now in terms of the recitation of a Name of God, one is putting into action through the 'force' of sound and/or contemplation of a divine Name that very attribute, as well as the owner of the attribute. At once, it is praise, evocation and invocation, awakening, supplication. It is 'moving' God.

Taking two of these words – evocation and invocation – can take us deeper into the practice of the asma... Both of these words derive from the Latin root work 'vocare', which means 'to call.' To evoke is to solicit a 'response' or to call something forth. Invoke is defined: "To appeal or to call forth



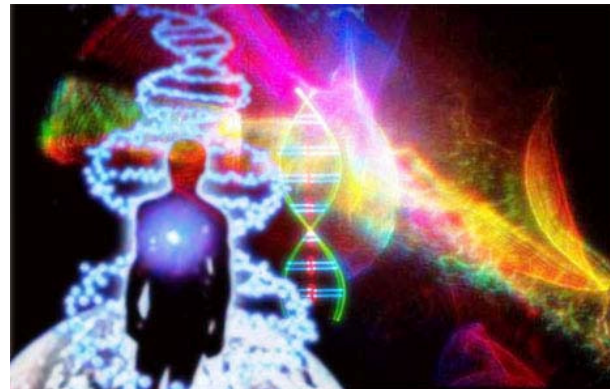
earnestly." So this is not a list for enumeration and vague recitation, but rather lends itself to an intimate involvement of the one doing the 'naming' (oneself, e.g. saying "Ya Rahman Ya Raheem") and the Named. It is calling forth, evoking, that attribute of the Named in oneself and invoking the Oneness, the presence of the Named through the sound and meaning of Its many attributes.

Pir Vilayat often used the word 'awakening' to denote the process of the spiritual path. This was certainly his approach to the practice of wazaif, or the mantric repetition of Divine sounds and names. The invocation of the 99 Names is intended to 'awaken' these qualities in us, to activate those that are needed in the present moment, or in the larger perspective of our life. Their recitation illuminates God's attributes (our 'divine inheritance') in our consciousness and makes them tangible to our mind, and to our soul.

In this way, we can become increasingly harmonious and healthy psychologically, aware of the interface of all the attributes, and conscious of what is called for by situation and time. With the help of our guide(s) and the Spirit of Guidance, we can listen to what is being called forth in our being, be it from the background or the foreground of consciousness.

Christ said "Be Ye Perfect as your God in Heaven is Perfect" – The practice of the asma al-husna gives sound and meaning to this teaching of Christ. Does this teaching of Christ mean that human beings are expected to be or become perfect? No – that would be a contradiction of the message of the prophets and scriptures. Christ himself was not perfect.

*Perhaps his meaning closer to:
"Recognize the reflection of Perfection in your being, in the way that each of us is a unique expression of the attributes. Know that in each of those attributes, however limited and imperfect we find them to be in ourselves, is an imprint of the perfect being of God." It is the One Being who is perfect -- but every atom of nature, including in human beings, carries the 'DNA' of God's perfected qualities. If all comes from Allah, as we so often state in the affirmations of our faith, then it behooves us to be able to see that Reality in all the qualities and attributes we find in manifestation. That includes their presence in our own personalities.*



The 99 Names are not all 'comfortable' nor is each conventionally 'beautiful.' Many might not consider "The One who brings destruction" or "The One who brings humiliation" as welcome attributes, for example, in God or for that matter in our own personalities. In this way, the study of Divine qualities helps to free us from the limited and wishful point of view that God's 'goodness' and 'welcomeness' fit our own human standards of 'goodness' or what we would typically welcome in our life and our own

beings. So much faith has been lost in humanity by the unfortunate tying of faith ('iman') to concepts of good fortune and comfort. When fortune changes and we see a particular form of suffering in one's life or that of others, we might say "How can that come from God? How can that be Divine?" These are questions that Moses asked often of Khizr, the teacher of the prophets whose lessons were often outside the bounds of apparent reason and ease. In the contemplation of the asma al-husna, one is provided with much understanding of the seemingly paradoxical nature of life and God, and this study can lead to a deep sense of security and faith. It can enable one to be in God's presence with whatever is offered in your life.



There is a question often asked by the metaphysician or the philosopher, when he or she reads that all is God and God is all. One says, 'If God is goodness, what is then the opposite of goodness? Is it outside God? If so, God is limited and something else exists as well as God. Are there two powers, rival powers? What is the power called evil?' It is true that God is all, but we would not call a person's shadow the person; evil is only a shadow, just like illness, which is another illusion. In reality there is only life, real existence, and illness is lack of life.

The Being of God is recognized by God's attributes. Therefore one might speak of God as the 'just' God. One sees all power, all goodness in God; but when the situation is changed, when one sees God as injustice, one begins to think that God is powerless, and to judge the action of God. But one must look at this from a different point of view. Human beings are limited, imperfect, and yet we try to judge the perfect Being, or God's perfect action, from our own imperfect standpoint. In order to judge, our vision must become as wide as the universe; then we might have a slight glimpse of the justice, which is perfect in itself. But when we try to judge every action by limiting God and by holding God responsible for every action, we confuse our faith, and through our own fault we begin to disbelieve.

- Hazrat Inayat Khan (edited for gender equivalence)

Passages from the Qur'an on the
Asma al-Husna
The 99 Names of God



And God's alone are the attributes of perfection; invoke Him, then, by these, and stand aloof from all who distort the meaning of His attributes.

Al A'Raf 7:180, tr. Asad

Say: "Invoke God, or invoke the Most Gracious:
by whichever name you invoke Him,
He is always the One -- for His are all the attributes of perfection."

Al Isra 17:110, tr. Asad

Allah is He, other than Whom there is no other god;
Who knows both what is hidden and what can be witnessed;
He is the Most Compassionate and Merciful.
Allah is He, other than Whom there is no other god;
the Sovereign, the One, the Source of Peace,
the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Security,
the Exalted, the Compelling, the Supreme.
Glory be to God, beyond any associations.
He is Allah, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Form.
To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names:
Whatever exists in heaven and earth declares His Praise and Glory.
And He is Exalted in Power, the Wise.

Al Hashr 59:22, tr. Helminski

Mevlâna Jalâluddîn Rumi on the
Asma al-Husna

Just as a person is in relation to you a father
and in relation to another either son or brother --
So the names of God in their number have relations:
He is from the viewpoint of the infidel the Tyrant (*Qahhar*);
from our viewpoint, the Merciful.

Divan e-Kebir, tr. Annemarie Schimmel

With us, the name of everything is its outward appearance;
with the Creator, the name of each thing is its inward reality.
In the eye of Moses, the name of his rod was "staff";
in the eye of the Creator, its name was "dragon."
In brief, that which we are in the end
is our real name with God.

Mathnawi I:1239-40, 1244

In conclusion: Let us all go hand in hand in this exploration of the asma al-husna. Let us endeavor to give them their due -- enough attention and contemplation enabling us to really nurture our understanding and attunement through a beautiful commitment and perseverance.

A Story: The Rebbe on gardening

*One day a Hasid went to his Rebbe for help.
"What am I doing wrong, master? I plant seeds
in my garden but they never come up."*

*"Tell me exactly what you're doing," said the
Rebbe.*

*"Well, every day I plant and water. Then at
night, I go to sleep, but in the middle of the
night, I wake up and get worried that the
seeds might not be growing. So I go outside, dig them up and, sure enough,
they're not growing!"*

"I think I understand your problem," said the Rebbe.



*Postscript: Here are some videos of recitations of the asma al-husna. Copy
the links and paste them into your browser to view and listen.*

*My favourite at the moment is a 'nasheed' by the popular vocalist Sami
Yusuf, a very moving song which invokes many of the asma, presenting them
with an array of human faces which convey great devotion and the presence
of the Divine qualities in each of us. Rather than reciting the Names in
order, as in the other videos below, this singer brings in a selection of the
Names in a more random way, from all directions in the list. It reminds us
that the Divine qualities are not limited to any law of sequence, but rather*

are ever-present, all-pervading, and set in infinite patterns. Every time I listen and watch, I feel very moved and inspired. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhwdEtO5fJE>

Here are some others which present the traditional list of 99 Names musically:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZYeiK22zow>

A lovely Turkish rendition, with the Names transliterated in Turkish alphabet (different than the usual spellings for English readers). The order is quite different from the traditional, though many names are in their usual groupings.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIZR9_0CdMg&feature=related

I like this very traditional and pure musical recitation. Very 'Arabic' pronunciation of the Arabic Names.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5sfs4rulh8&feature=related>

If you want a recitation to go to sleep with, I think this is the one. This is a very sweet high melody. And for a surprise, listen to the above link first, then go to this next link and see who's singing it:

<http://www.kamaluddin.info/>

Finally, this 'nasheed' from Shaheed Alkawn, featuring artful and tasteful presentation of an English translation of the Names while they are being sung in Arabic over zikr accompaniment:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFh6gXmWdIo>

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