



CHAPTER 2

Sufi Remembrance Practices in the Meditation Marketplace of a Mobile App

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“Maybe people will stumble upon it and say, ‘Do Muslims *meditate*?’”—
Sufi teacher discussing her meditation practice on the mobile app Insight
Timer¹

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores how religion is presented and encountered on mobile meditation apps. My focus for this exploration is a collection of Sufi guided ‘meditation’ practices found on Insight Timer, a free mobile app that has hundreds of thousands of users each day² and offers guided practices of all sorts that it designates ‘meditations,’ including practices associated with a variety of religious traditions. Through an anthropologically driven account of digital presentations of religious practices, particularly representations of contemporary Sufism and Islam and in relation to onground communities, I undertake an exploration of what Sufi³ ‘meditation’ practices on this app may suggest for how people encounter religion, specifically Sufism and Islam, on mobile religious apps.⁴

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I ask how particular representations of religious practices as ‘meditation’ may expand users’ encounters with religion into a marketplace-oriented and experimental model.

Both the presence and the content of the Sufi meditation practices on Insight Timer raise fruitful points for consideration of how religious identity, practice, religiosity/spiritualism, community, and commercialism are intertwined in the digital age and through mobile apps in particular. What are the implications of these mobile app-based encounters with religious practices and communities for our understanding of religious practice in the current era of mindfulness popularity? Considering the Sufi practices on this app on their own terms within the context of a particular Sufi order, as well as in the context of other competing religious ‘meditation’ practices on the app, I want to explore how particular representations of religious practices as ‘meditation’ may expand users’ encounters with religion into a marketplace-oriented⁵ and experimental model. I also want to prompt consideration of the possibilities these app ‘meditations’ open up in terms of outsider engagement with Sufism and how this may be facilitated by the elision of the Sufi and ultimately, Islamic, identity. Through these considerations, I intend to demonstrate how digitally based encounters with religion and on-the-ground community-based encounters with religion may interact and be co-constructive in complex and surprising ways.

A MOBILE MEDITATION MARKETPLACE

The current explosion in mobile apps is taking place within the larger cultural moment in which once specialized services, forms of entertainment, etc., are now available to anyone if an app developer can get a product out and the interested user has a smartphone. A quick look at the app store on iTunes shows a plethora of mobile apps offering up tools for ‘mindfulness,’ providing digital programs for anyone with a mobile device in their hands and a desire for guided meditation or ‘mindfulness’ experience. The marketplace for meditation apps in particular appears to be booming, riding a wave of popularity of meditation more generally and an increased usage of mobile apps in smartphone users’ day-to-day lives. Articles in mainstream magazines and hospital bulletins such as ‘What’s Your Meditation Type? (+5 Best Meditation Apps)’ (Seppälä 2015) and ‘Best Meditation Apps 2018’ (Cartreine 2018) testify to a rapidly expanding mindfulness and meditation

marketplace in American culture. When it comes to meditation, the normative view is that it is good for everyone and part of a healthy lifestyle. Meditation is discussed in both media and medical settings as a way to combat the stresses and anxiety common in contemporary life, and as a tool for helping to lower blood pressure and treat depression. We are long past the era testing of Tibetan Buddhist monks' brainwaves while they meditated to see if the effects of meditation are 'real,' i.e., have been confirmed by science (Dobbs 2005), which is often the gateway to fringe practices becoming normalized. The allopathic medical world now prescribes meditation to relieve patient stress and anxiety and to improve overall health and increase one's ability to concentrate and maintain focused attention. The question is no longer 'does meditation work?' but rather how people can fit it into their lives.

The meditation apps landscape has become a mindfulness marketplace. There are many different types of meditation available and the interested individual can shop around to find the best one for their needs. There are mobile apps that offer a variety of meditation techniques guided by a range of instructors of religious or non-religious orientation. On Insight Timer in particular, a teacher's or program's popularity with the app user community is indicated in both the app presentation and the user ratings; their formal training in the practices they are teaching and religious affiliations may or may not be disclosed. Religion is ubiquitous on the app; it is named, unnamed, re-named, and incorrectly named—all of which we will see in the following pages—but ever present.

The elephant in the room for scholars of religion then is where religion fits into all of this Religious language and religious markers are present sometimes, but often absent, in practices and worldviews glossed as 'meditation' that have clear roots in unequivocally religious traditions. Meditation and mindfulness practices now proffered in mainstream American culture as secular modalities of the wellness industry have demonstrable historical roots in dharmic religious traditions, particularly Buddhism and Yogic Hindu traditions, but in some cases Islam as well. The task then, for scholars of religion, is to trace the ways this elision of religion takes place and to interrogate what it means for religious institutions and religious communities. We should also ask more generally about the implications of this elision for the changing nature of religion as we think of it, including the modes through which people encounter and *name* religion as 'religion,' or not. These are of course larger questions, but the presence of Sufi 'meditations' on Insight Timer,

and the ways people use and encounter them, mapped in this essay, offer potentially useful insights into these questions.

Insight Timer is an example of multi-religious cum-secular app platform on which religious practices are being posted among practices not rooted in identifiable religious traditions. In the Islamic, or Muslim, ‘cyberscape’—a term used by Robert Rozehnal (2019) for ‘the alternative narratives and networks enabled by digital technologies,’ there are numerous apps that give a user entry to the Quran and guide its use, such as IslamicCal or Muslim Pro, or iQuran; other apps offer qibla direction, locations of nearby mosques, information on prayer, *adhan* alerts, and more (Bunt 2010). In the introduction to his book *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience*, Rozehnal reminds us that Islam has

never been static, uniform, or monolithic. Throughout history, Islam has flowed through diverse social landscapes like water, adapting to the contours of local geographies and taking on the colors of local cultures. The transplantation of Sufi piety and practices into American society and across the virtual realm of cyberspace, therefore, repeats a well-established pattern of continuous accommodation, adaptation, and transformation. (Rozehnal 2019, p. 14)

How more ostensibly secular mobile apps are part of this new cyberspace in American Islam is worthy of our attention. Bunt, whom Rozehnal cites widely for his in-depth study of digital Islam, points out that ‘the impact of increased and varied phone applications in the name of Islam is transformative, in that it offers wider access to Islamic resources (amongst a competitive marketplace) and digital access continue to increase’ (Bunt 2010). The USHS Sufi Muslim mobile app practices that I discuss here, as we will see, exist not in the field of competition with Islamic resources with which Bunt is concerned, but, as one of the USHS teachers notes, in a field of competition with seekers of contemplative practices from all faiths, proclivities, and backgrounds.

Among the Sufi ‘meditations’ posted on the Insight Timer app, several are produced by the University of Spiritual Healing and Sufism (USHS), the school and major site of transmission of a North American branch of Shadhiliyya Sufism. The branch was established in North America in the mid-1990s by Muhammad Sa‘id al-Jamal al-Rifa‘i al-Shadhiliyya (referred to as Sidi by his students) (d. 2015). Al-Jamal was born

in Jerusalem and taught at al-Aqsa mosque. He traced his *silsila* (spiritual lineage) through Abu Hasan al-Shadhiliyya (d. 1258) and Ibn Mashish (al-Shadhiliyya's thirteenth-century teacher) all the way back to 'Ali and the Prophet Muhammad.⁶ The community has two main centers, one in California and one in Pennsylvania, and there are other smaller groups across the United States established by members of the order in their local communities. My analysis of Insight Timer's Sufi Practices focuses on the repertoire published specifically by USHS and I use these as an entry point for examination of the app's more general presentation of Sufi 'meditations.' I draw upon several years of fieldwork and study with this Sufi community to offer an anthropologically-informed examination of their mobile app productions, of other 'Sufi' practices on the app, and of the app environment of Insight Timer.

During time spent with the community at its Pennsylvania center, I became aware of USHS's guided practices (or 'meditations') on Insight Timer. Online app-based practices were first mentioned by a teacher at a retreat I attended, in the context of discussing ways of keeping one's spiritual practice active when mired in the day-to-day responsibilities of ordinary life. In other words, the app was shared as a tool for facilitating practice when not benefitting from structure of a Sufi retreat's focused program of ritual piety, prayer, and contemplative work. At no other time have I heard members of the community talk about the guided practices on the Insight Timer mobile app. I decided, following that Sufi retreat, to download the app and explore the practices to see how they compare to the community's onground practices. I was surprised to find on Insight Timer that this small Sufi community's 'meditations' have received a steady stream of visitors/users, but that a large percentage of these appear *not* to have a connection with the Shadhiliyya order, or at least not an apparent one. I would come to learn, upon studying Insight Timer more carefully, that the number of users of USHS's practices is tiny compared to other teachers' and programs' users on the app. I was also interested to initially find that in their digital form the community's practices are not different from the onground versions of the same practices; what is different, and rich for exploration, is the way the practices are situated within the app, the other 'Sufi' meditations that sit beside them on the app, the larger context—what I will call the meditation marketplace of the app itself—in which their digital productions are found.

A MEDITATION LABYRINTH: LABELING, CATEGORIZING, AND EXPERIMENTAL ENCOUNTERS

Insight Timer presents no religious affiliation or identity and markets itself as offering ‘the largest library of free guided meditations on earth’⁷ with 10,892 meditation practices in total on offer. It does not by default present its meditation instructors’ certifications or credentials for leading meditations, though each teacher or institute with practices on the app may do so in a summary line and short description. On Insight Timer there are two main practice tabs: ‘courses’ and ‘meditations.’ At the top of the main interface, before one even encounters the categories of meditations, is written ‘How Long Have you Got?’ with options ranging in five minute increments (0–5, 6–10, 11–15, etc.) and a tab at the top that gives further settings options for meditations: users can filter the search by the voice (male or female), by background music (with or without), and can choose to ‘hide religious content’ or ‘hide spiritual content.’ It is not disclosed how the terms religious and spiritual are being distinguished from one another here and I can find no clarification on the app’s website. The ‘Meditation’ tab leads to ‘Guided Meditations,’ which is divided into the following categories: things you can ‘Get Help With,’ which include ‘recovery and healing,’ ‘sleep,’ ‘stress,’ ‘anxiety,’ ‘creativity and performance,’ ‘happiness,’ ‘spiritual,’ ‘relationships,’ and ‘kids and teens.’ Below that are practices labeled ‘Great for Beginners,’ which include ‘anxiety relief,’ ‘*devi*’⁸ prayer,’ ‘welcoming acceptance,’ ‘learning to surrender,’ ‘morning ritual,’ ‘be the observer,’ and more. Each of these links not only to a practice one can do immediately, but also to a tab for multi-day courses offered by the same meditation teacher for a small charge.

Though there are multiple ways the meditations are categorized on the app, the app’s default grouping is either by the style of the practice (i.e., visualization, sounds, concentration, self-observation, etc.) or by the intended goal of the practice (i.e., anxiety relief, happiness, recovery and healing, divine connection, etc.). Upon scrolling further down past the above-mentioned categories, religion finally peeks its head through, with the title ‘Origins.’ Under this category heading is written ‘From the religious and spiritual to the secular and scientific, we are united by our diversity.’ There, meditations are categorized in three groupings, different from any of the above: ‘Sciences,’ ‘Concepts,’ and ‘Traditions.’ *Religious* traditions? Ah yes, here it is: this tab leads to a list of seventeen

religious traditions listed in order by the number of meditations affiliated with each. To no surprise, the first listed is 'Buddhism' (3629 meditations) and the next is 'Yogic Tradition' (1971 meditations); twelfth on the list is 'Sufism' (43 meditations), and thirteenth is 'Islam' (13 meditations). Of the thirteen meditations categorized under 'Islam,' ten are cross-listed within the 'Sufism' category.

Of the mobile app's recordings listed under the category 'Sufism,' some bear clear traces of being embedded in Sufism in its Islamic forms and others bear none. Those that have no Islamic or Sufi features appear to be miscategorized (or perhaps intentionally misrepresented). The first 'Sufi' practice listed is the most popular (38.1k plays) and is, of all thirteen, the most conspicuously un-Sufi and un-Islamic: 'Kundalini Gong Breath Meditation' posted by 'WelcomeEarth' and led by a teacher named 'Hari,' who guides this Hindu/Sikh/Kundalini yoga hybrid meditations. One user rating describes it as 'Ethereal and trancelike... Felt like I was floating along the universe. *Satnam.*' *Satnam* is a Punjabi and Sanskrit phrase central in Sikh sacred scripture, the Guru Granth, and roughly translates as 'God's name is truth.' *Satnam* is also used as a mantra in Kundalini Yoga practices. On Insight Timer this 'meditation' is categorized also under 'Kundalini Yoga' practices, which the app describes as 'stemming from Hinduism.' Yet it is the first 'mediation' to show up under 'Sufism' since, by default unless users change the filter settings, practices are listed in order of popularity, calculated by the user ratings and plays by users reaching it (and rating it) through any category, such as a 'Yoga' or 'Kundalini Yoga' practice. Insight Timer's practice of allowing the meditation practices to be grouped in multiple and overlapping categories can lead to startling misrepresentations such as this.

To add further to the unwieldy categorization/labeling of meditation practices, there is yet another category titled 'Sufi Meditation.' This is accessed by scrolling down below the USHS practices where there is a tab for 'Related,' under which is 'Divine Connection,' 'Chanting Meditation,' 'Sufi Meditation,' and 'Sufism.' At a point, the categorization becomes labyrinthine. Religion, in the formal institutional and historically delineated sense, appears on the 'Sufi Meditation' tab in this description:

Sufi Meditation is a central component of Islamic spirituality. The Sufi tradition centres on developing a personal relationship with God through

self-knowledge and self-inquiry. It uses Zikr (chanting) and Muraqba (meditation) to empty the mind and heart of spiritual pollutants. Meditation aims to balance, heal and enrich followers to face life reenergized and revived.

So here, then, is acknowledgment by Insight Timer of the practices being embedded in Islamic tradition, which it describes as ‘Islamic spirituality.’ The practices listed underneath this definition of Sufi meditation range from two *adhans* (call to prayer), a ‘heartbeat meditation with Rumi,’ a lecture on Sufism, and what we might call a hybrid meditation (which I discuss below) consisting of some Arabic prayers, and the USHS guided practices.

The other main tab, ‘Sufism,’ further displays Islamic dimensions and as such raises additional questions, with the following description by Insight Timer reading:

Sufism is a set of mystical beliefs and practices which originated from early Islamic asceticism in the 8th-9th centuries CE. It is a spiritual path structured around the concept of Oneness. Sufism encourages individual evolution, opening the heart to reflect the Divine Truth. Followers seek direct encounters with God through spinning in time with music, confronting pain and sorrow and forcing themselves out of habitual modes. Sufis have contributed greatly to Islamic literature and are known in the West through the writing of the great poet Rumi.⁹

This section includes some of the same practices as in the ‘Sufi Meditation’ grouping described above yet there are more; many of these have only loose, if any, Sufi features, with little connection to Islam. This raises questions, which I discuss below, about an app’s representation of religious traditions that result from teachers (the individual meditation producers) choosing the categories in which they would like their practices to be grouped and advertised.¹⁰

There seems to be no pattern or set of intentional parameters for what is designated as each, as some of the meditations under ‘Sufism’ are clearly Islamic Sufi practices yet they are not categorized under ‘Islam.’ Some of the ‘meditations’ under ‘Islam’ are neither Islamic nor Sufi in any strict sense. For example, one is called ‘Forgive the Dream’ and its description, written by its developer/teacher, reads: ‘a beautiful audio track featuring dreamy music and poetry recital. Music by me, track entitled “Montana Cellist.” The poems are by Hafiz the famous Persian

poet.' Though there is one recording of an *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer) by Canadian Qawwali singer Tahir Qawwal (it is slightly avant-garde, with the sound of ocean waves in the background), the USHS 'meditations,' which I describe below, are among the most Islamic of those categorized under 'Sufism.' Yet they are not found under 'Islam.' Under 'Sufism' the practices are categorized in creative and hybrid ways: many of these meditations that are listed under 'Traditions' are listed as well under categories more descriptive of the meditations themselves or the goals of the meditations. For example, when one scrolls down from a meditation titled 'Relax in Divine Surrender' grouped under both 'Islam' and 'Sufism,' 'related categories' appear; when one clicks those, the same 'Relax in Divine Surrender' meditation comes up alongside a different grouping of meditations than what were found beside it in the 'Islam' or 'Sufism' category, including, 'Awakening,' 'Divine Connection,' 'Managing Stress,' and 'Guided Imagery.' Under 'Guided Surrender,' a link to 'Relax in Divine Surrender' is also found among 3060 other meditations, many of which are non-religious. Under the category called 'Sufi Meditation' (22 are listed), which contains all four USHS 'meditations,' we find practices that are categorized *neither* in 'Sufism' nor in 'Islam,' such as a 'meditation' called 'Rumi the Guesthouse,' which is a poetry recitation.

Under 'Sufism,' the meditation with the highest popularity ranking is 'Relax in Divine Surrender,' published on the app by Ihsan Alexander, who describes himself as 'a leading-edge coach and trainer in classical Islamic and Sufi meditation.' Each practice has an image, and the image for this practice is a 13th c. Ottoman miniature painting of Prophet Muhammad praying at the Ka'ba, his face elided by a white blaze as he kneels at this sacred center of Islamic cosmology.¹¹ The meditation begins with steady, soft keyboard notes then an American male voice states the Arabic Islamic greeting '*As-salamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh*'¹² followed by 'May the perfect peace of God, be with you.' Then he says, 'in this guided meditation we are going to be entering into a deep state of relaxation. A deep state of relaxation and perfect peace.' At one point, he says '*bismillah ar-rahman ar-raheem*.'¹³ ... Simply enjoy your breath. Just be.' He guides the listener through simple breathing-based relaxation techniques and continues with what we might call a generic, North American, non-sectarian Vipassana-Buddhist-tinged guided meditation wherein thoughts that arise are to 'flow' and 'gently vanish,' with the meditator being told to become aware of

‘any tension in your [the] body’ and ‘to gently let it go, let everything go.’ Then the instruction is to ‘surrender.’ Eventually soft drums begin to join the long electronic notes that ring in the background and the male voice says, ‘The divine light in praise of God is pouring down on you. Pressing, washing you, cleansing you, infusing every cell in your body in a deep divine state of presence. God’s mercy covers you, encompasses you, embraces you, surrounds you, envelops you. You are completely submerged in God’s divine presence of light,’ and the guided instruction continues.

This meditation, the most played practice (33k plays) among all of the ‘Sufi’ practices on Insight Timer, and the second most played in all of the ‘Islamic’ practices, uses the words ‘God’ and ‘divine’ repeatedly, but ‘Allah,’ the Arabic and Islamic word for God, is conspicuously absent. Not once it is said apart from the initial greeting and the one *bismillah*. No other Arabic prayers are used and nothing else distinctively Islamic is present. Its style of guided practice does have Sufi elements including, the practice’s focus on the heart, the divine presence, surrender, and God’s mercy; these are themes within Sufism and Islam and are a focus of Sufi practice and piety most broadly. But they are not marked or acknowledged as such in this meditation. Sufi healing practices may involve visualization of the breath and scans of the body, yet this aspect of the meditation is more likely to be interpreted by users as a form of *yoga nidra*, a well-known practice in secular yoga studios and meditation circuits in North America. Non-Sufis and non-Muslims would not know that some elements of this ‘Relax in Divine Surrender’ practice have Sufi themes and hence Islamic resonances. Yet it is paradoxical too; although this meditation is categorized in the ‘Sufism’ and ‘Islam’ sections on Insight Timer and contains these subtly recognizable Sufi characteristics, it could also be described more as a sort of Buddhist-Islamic hybrid experimental meditation than a Sufi *dhikr* or meditation, or any type of identifiably Islamic or Sufi practice. Is it the most popular within the ‘Sufi’ meditations in part because it is not marked as Islamic but it has popular, well-known aspects that can seem more familiar to users as Buddhist or Yogic? Would it be as popular if it incorporated the word Allah repeatedly or if contained Quranic prayers in Arabic? Would these additions mark it as a religious practice exclusive to the faith of people whose ascription is ‘Muslim’? Would they make it seem less available to non-Muslims and non-Sufis?

FROM ONGROUND TO IN-APP, FROM *DHIKR* TO ‘MEDITATION’

The Insight Timer ‘meditations’ offered by USHS are found in only three categories: ‘Divine Connection,’ ‘Sufism,’ and ‘Sufi Meditation.’ They are not found in the ‘Islamic’ meditations category, which is surprising given that they are arguably the most Islamic of any ‘meditations’ I have found on Insight Timer. The USHS summary on the mobile app (each teacher or institute with practices has a summary line) is: ‘The University of Spiritual Healing & Sufism (USHS) envisions a world where the flag of love, peace, mercy, justice, freedom, and beauty flies above every home. USHS educational programs are based on the teachings of Shadhiliyya Sufism that facilitate spiritual healing and spiritual transformation of individuals and organizations, and train individuals to take these teachings into the world to serve, heal, and lead in the way of God and His Prophets. California, United States. sufi-university.org.’ USHS’s page on the app has four ‘guided meditations’: ‘*La ilaha ill’llah* Check-In,’ ‘Heart Chant for Allah,’ ‘Remembrance Meditation: “*Al-Wasi*”: The All-Embracing,’ and ‘*La ilaha illa’llah*-Lunch Break.’ The meditations, or *dhikrs*, offered by USHS are traditionally Islamic in that they are Arabic phrases from the Quran, repeated in traditionally Sufi ritual methods: repeating one of the ‘qualities of Allah’ through one of Allah’s names from the Quran (such as *Al-Wasi*), or repeating the first part of the *shahada*, the Islamic testimony of faith (A., *la ilaha illa’llah*). These ‘meditations’ are in fact *dhikr* practices directly transmitted from the order’s Shaykh, Sidi al-Jamal to the teachers and students of the order. When practiced in the onground community, women and men cover their heads and use a string of beads to keep track of *dhikr* repetitions—all traditional aspects of Muslim and Sufi ritual practice.

The first of the USHS practices is titled ‘*La ilaha illa’llah* Check-In.’ It is listed as a six-minute long ‘meditation’ that is ‘suitable for everyone’ and as a ‘guided or teacher-led practice.’ These are pre-formulated designators on Insight Timer. Below that it is explained, by USHS that,

Remembrance is the name we Sufis give to our form of heart-focused meditation, where we remember the Name of our Lord and who we are as human beings in creation. As you listen to or repeat the Divine phrases, please focus your attention gently on your heart. The Arabic phrase ‘*la ilaha illa’llah*’ means ‘There is no being worthy of worship except for Allah.’

Notable here is that only here, deep within the app, is the practice called ‘remembrance,’ which is the religiously accurate English language label for it, as opposed to ‘meditation.’ ‘Remembrance’ is the English translation of *dhikr*, or *zikr*, a long-standing and varied practice in Islamic ritual piety that refers to the Islamic practice of repetitive, ritual, verbal (sometimes silently) remembrance of the divine, Allah. The English term ‘meditation,’ by contrast, has an implied secularism about it, veiling the religious roots of practices that are seated, focused, quiet, and may or may not involve the repetition of sacred or motivational phrases. Why would these be packaged and presented as ‘meditation,’ a choice that removes their Sufi, and by extension, Islamic, markers? The limitations of the app program itself can explain in part why remembrance practices are labeled as ‘meditation,’ and not as, more accurately, remembrance, or *dhikr*, or ‘recitation of divine qualities’ (as the *Al-Wasi* practice is): Insight Timer has no emic categories with these terms. In being labeled a ‘meditation,’ these practices join the ranks of the abundant other new-age, adapted, and appropriated religious rituals from traditions outside the dominant Christian-fold that populate magazines, websites, and retreat programs of holistic health and wellness industry in North America. Further, the label ‘meditation’ imbues the practices with a non-sectarian and even non-religious character, which is likely to have the desired effect of drawing more people already within the app to try it out. In the environment of heightened Islamophobia in North America and the West more generally, Islamic practices (and Islam in general) seem not to fit easily into the mass marketed-spiritual modes, platforms, and modalities of energy work, healing, wellness, etc., that have become a multi-million dollar industry.

When I spoke with the Sufi teacher who posted the *Al-Wasi* practice, she said the rationale of USHS for their (not Insight Timer’s) use of the term ‘meditation’ to describe their Sufi practices on Insight Timer is that ‘it’s about reaching a wider audience of people who are interested in an esoteric practice, which these days is understood to include chanting, yoga, etc. [i.e. the users of Insight Timer]....The use of the label meditation is not an intentional misrep. We did it with integrity and as way to reach a wider audience.’ When asked why they were labeled as meditations—rather than remembrance, or *dhikr*, or reciting the divine qualities—she explained, ‘We did it for the specific audience [on Insight Timer]. If we wanted to get more Sufis we would have emphasized *dhikr*, if but we want to reach people of all faiths, as we do, we emphasize it as meditation. Then maybe people will stumble upon it and say, ‘Do Muslims *meditate*?! Woah!’¹⁴

The ratings and reviews for ‘*La ilaha ill’Allah* Check-In’ (which is listed as having 2.1k plays) give some view into the users, or participants, in this particular ‘meditation.’ A few users appear to be Muslim, signaled by their use of Arabic/Islamic phrases, such as one who leaves the comment ‘*Ma sha allah*. It is very beautiful’ (user named Oz Yona) and a few users who refer to the ‘meditation’ more properly as ‘remembrance,’ a term a non-Muslim or non-Sufi would be unlikely to use for meditation. Use of the term ‘remembrance’ marks some familiarity with a particularly Sufi and Muslim way of conceptualizing and describing ritual focus on the divine: ‘Good remembrance’ (by user name Evian Patterson) and ‘Sweet and simple. This is my favourite [sic] Arabic chant. Thank you for providing it here’ (Weronika, Chojna, West Pomeranian, Voivodeship). Comments by users Claire, ‘A heart-centering and heart-opening chant,’ and Mary Ellen, ‘Good remembrance,’ suggests the users may be part of this Sufi order or another Sufi order, or at least be familiar with Sufi principles, as the mention of ‘heart-centering’ and ‘heart-opening,’ invoke key ritual modalities (or goals), and act as key phrases in the lexicon of American Shadhiliyya vernacular, as well as Sufi vernacular more broadly. A user named Rasheeda, in Chicago, comments that it is ‘[b]eautifully centering in the most essential truth of the origin and sustenance of all that is.’ Her familiarity with the religious import of *La ilaha ill’Allah* suggests a possible background in Islam. Comments from other users of the ‘*La ilaha ill’Allah* Check-In’ are more ambiguous. Users’ names are listed before their reviews, and very few of them are the Arabic or Arabic-originating names commonly associated with Muslim communities; these names—Colette, Serenity, Claire, Mary Ellen, Kevin, Nathalie, Ron, etc.—do not offer clues to the user’s religions. User comments show that some have done this *dhikr* before, or are just familiar with this chant as the first half of the *shahada*, while others seem to encounter it with no knowledge of its context as the building block of the Islamic testimony of faith.

Many of the user ratings suggest a more general, non-Sufi and even non-religious approach to and experience of the practice. Yet in using this app they are experimenting—knowingly or unknowingly—in a long-standing form of Islamic ritual devotion, the recitation of the first half of the *shahada*: *La ilaha ill’Allah* (A., ‘there is no god but God’). They refer to it instead a ‘chant’: ‘Very pleasant way to connect to God,’ ‘So wonderful!!! Loved this!,’ ‘Different and interesting,’ ‘Interesting to explore other forms of worship.’ Many such

comments are followed with the peace emoji (the North American peace sign), a heart emoji, and a Sanskrit ‘om’ emoji. Another user, Courtney (Vancouver, BC)—who writes ‘I love this mantra, the words are intensely meaningful to me. Thank you very much!’—calls the meditation a ‘mantra,’ a Hindu/Buddhist/Jain term now appropriated into the English-language vernacular of the wellness and spiritual-but-not-religious industry. This comment suggests a possible point of entry into this meditation is through a model derived from one of the dharmic religious traditions, perhaps Hindu or Buddhist. Similarly, a user named Jo Muir (Beaumont, Adelaide) comments ‘A lovely mantra thank you.’ A user named Carol (DeLand, FL) comments ‘Thank you. The chanting is enjoyable and good to meditate to’ and another user Susan (Killarney, Ireland) comments ‘Very nice I love the chanting,’ followed by emojis of hearts, namaste hands, and a blue butterfly. A user named Prakash (a common Hindu male name) whose location is listed as Quatre Bornes, Mauritius, gives it five stars and lists as his comments an emoji of a Mauritian flag, an ‘om’ emoji, and the word ‘shanti’ (Sanskrit, Hindi, ‘peace’). *Om shanti* is a Hindu and Buddhist phrase invoking peace and is used as a *mantra* in these traditions.¹⁵ Ron E. (Buffalo, NY) writes of the ways the ‘*La ilaha ill’lalah* Check-In’ practice is effective for him in contrast to other types of ‘chanting,’ comparing them as more or less mechanical and ‘human.’ He notes the ‘low fi’ quality of the USHS recording and the lo-fi’s usefulness in reminding him of the physicality of chanting, and this physicality leads him to thoughts of his mortality. Indeed, the recording is surprisingly low tech, compared to the heavily produced and polished guided meditations available on other pages/tabs of the app (such as ‘Relax in Divine Surrender’ described earlier). Paper crumples in the background at one point, the rhythm of the chant is unsteady at parts, and even the woman’s voice as she chants is unsteady at points. The only reply by USHS to a user comment is to Ron E’s comment above. USHS writes, ‘Pardon the delay, but this feedback was delightful to read-thank you <3 We are a small heart-centered bunch!’

USHS’s fifteen-minute practice titled ‘Heart Chant for Allah’ has had 1.3k plays and is given the same description as the ‘*La ilaha ill’lalah* Check-In’ meditation except for its concluding sentence ‘The Arabic name for God, “Allah”, translated literally in English to “The God.”’ The practice is listed as ‘suitable for everyone’ and has an average rating of 4.2 (out of 5) stars. It begins with a woman with an Australian

accent saying ‘Please join me in a fifteen-minute remembrance using the divine name, Allah. Allah is the name for God in Arabic. Which literally translates in English to the God. Remembrance is the name we Sufis give to our form of heart-focused mediation where we remember the name of our Lord and who we are as human beings in creation. As we repeat this divine name together, please let your attention focus gently on your heart.’ She proceeds to repeat in a monotone but slightly melodious manner, ‘Allah. Allah. Allah.’ As it would be in an onground practice of this *dhikr*, her emphasis is on the first syllable of ‘Allah’ and the rate and volume of her repetitions change from time to time. Her repetitions of Allah continue on; paper crumples in the background and her voice occasionally falters between repetitions. The rhythm is occasionally broken when she swallows.

In the twenty-two user comments for ‘Heart Chant for Allah,’ we see the same ambiguous picture of the users’ religious backgrounds and identities. Some identify as Sufi and note the comfort this practice brings: Rebecca in Arlington, TX, writes ‘Thank you and many blessings! This remembrance took me quickly to that state of deep connection. I became a Sufi in 1998 and these practices are deeply comforting to me Alhamdulillah!!’ One user (named Amazon) gives it a 5-star rating and a one-word comment ‘Namaste,’ and another user writes ‘I found this good to support clearing my mind and into light expansion ...Namaste,’ followed with the namaste-hands emoji. Are these practitioners of yoga? And hence the use of *namaste* as a term of approval or peace or good-bye at the end of a user comment? If so, then it is striking they would be chanting ‘Allah’ for fifteen minutes in this practice—it suggests a hybridity of non-Western terminologies and religious conceptions and modes in the Sufi mobile app landscape.

USHS’s ‘Remembrance Meditation: *Al Wasi*: The All-Embracing’ practice is listed as ‘suitable for everyone,’ 31 minutes long, and as having ‘1.2k plays.’ Below its title is written, ‘This Sufi meditation is focused on invoking and reciting the Divine Name “*Al-Wasi*: The All-Embracing, The All-Reaching, The Endless.” An opportunity to quiet the mind and allow your awareness to expand to a place where there is space for everything.’ One feature of the description is noteworthy: Though the meditation’s description uses some Arabic, there is no use of the Islamic and Arabic word for God, Allah, which is used liberally in the discussions during onground gatherings of this Sufi community before and after any practices of the reciting the divine names, such as this

Al-Wasi practice. This Sufi practice in the community onground involves the repetition of one of the 99 names of Allah; it is practiced as a *dhikr*, usually with counting beads and repeating the name ninety-nine times or in increments of thirty-three or one hundred. The *Al-Wasi* ‘meditation’ begins with an introduction, in English, in the voice of one of the Sufi teachers in the community. She explains this practice and its benefits, calling it ‘meditation remembrance.’ ‘Prayer,’ she states, ‘is when we’re speaking to God, and meditation is when we’re receiving and listening. And Sufi meditation, or remembrance, has elements of both. Today I’d like to start out with prayer, and then move into meditation and receiving.’ Following these introductory remarks, she recites the *Al-Fatiha* in Arabic and explains that it is a prayer and is the first *surah* (chapter) in the Quran and that ‘it’s a very beautiful and healing prayer.’ After reciting the *fatiha* she asks the user to ‘focus in your heart’ on ‘your beloved God’ ‘your creator,’ ‘the divine creator.’ She does not use the word Allah for God. Again, this is a notable contrast to discourse among members of the community onground, in which the word Allah is used fluently and regularly. She explains the user ‘can say *Ya-Wasi*,’ which makes it ‘more of an invocation,’ or ‘*Al-Wasi*, which is a naming, and so is more intimate.’ She then leads recitation of the name *Al-Wasi* for approximately twenty minutes.

In the user reviews of *Al-Wasi* one user calls herself a ‘beloved,’ the term members of this particular Shadhiliyya *tariqah* use for one another, which their Shaykh affectionately called his students and encouraged them to call each other. She writes, from Mexico City, ‘Beautiful! Alhamdulillah! Thanks to your heart! From a beloved in MexicoCity’. One who is not a member of this Sufi order would likely miss this in-group reference, but for other ‘beloveds’ this user’s admission of her identity as a Shadhiliyya Sufi evokes the community of embodied onground Shadhiliyya Sufis spread across North America, who would more typically be participating in group *dhikrs* in one another’s homes, at retreats, at USHS, at its centers in northern California and Pennsylvania, or any of its other community centers, including the one in Mexico City, Mexico. Mav, from San Francisco, says ‘Incredible. Alhimdulliah (sic).’ The practices may attract non-Sufis and non-Muslims, but they also offer fellow ‘beloveds’ (i.e., members of this Sufi order) support for their full-time spiritual practice. I inquired with the teacher of the *Al-Wasi* practice about the feedback she has received from the community about these app practices on Insight Timer. Her sense,

she explained, is that ‘it helps them to feel as if they have some structure to follow along and that they aren’t by themselves as well.’ For herself, she said that ‘doing practices with others can make it easier to make the deep connections since we can access the energy of the “group heart.”’ Also, anything that helps me get past my surface needs and get me to be able to show up more fully is helpful. Sometimes guided meditations allow the mind to get out of the way a bit since I don’t have my inner “manager” working.’¹⁶ This same teacher also does a ‘live remembrance’ on Facebook sometimes and explained she ‘get[s] a lot of views and positive comments about how it helps people.’¹⁷ She said she also uses apps called Quran and Prayer Time and knows a lot of others in the community who do, too. These Islamic, non-Sufi specific, apps can help anchor the full-time practices of Sufis who live, as she does, ‘isolated from [their] spiritual community’ and without a mosque in their hometown; it assists, for example, in their *salat* practice.

The unspoken—at least in the on-app community and practices—Islamic foundation of the USHS ‘meditation’ practices is salient. Many of the serious students in this Shadhiliyya Sufi order have taken the *shahada*, make efforts to pray *salat* regularly, abstain from pork and alcohol, fast during the month of Ramadan, attend Jumah (Friday prayers), give *zakat*, and even go on Hajj. This is not one of the forms of non-Islamic hybrid traditions that labels itself ‘Sufi’ or a ‘Sufism’ from which Islam has been extracted. Nonetheless, members I have worked with and met in the onground community are private about how they self-identify—as Muslim, as Sufi, or both. I have observed that few are concerned with this question of how they can and/or should identify religiously, nor with what others see or do not see them as religiously (i.e., Muslim or not). The clear sense is that the deeper one gets into the teachings of this Sufi order, the greater commitment one makes to the ‘outer’ expressions of Islamic tradition and piety listed above. The written teachings of the Shaykh make clear that he believed one cannot ably proceed on the Sufi path without practicing the Sharia, the term he used broadly for overarching Islamic foundational practices (the Islamic pillars of practice of Hajj pilgrimage, daily *salat* prayer, fasting during Ramadan, paying *zakat*) in the secular and non-Muslim majority context of North America.

Sufi teachers in this order (who were direct students of the Shaykh) emphasize that one should not be practicing other meditation techniques or ‘dabbling’ in other spiritual paths at the same time as

practicing Sufism. In workshops I have attended, senior teachers in the order have at points described Sufi practices as a gateway to the devotee's 'feeling the [divine] unity,' or 'tasting' the unity of God—i.e., experiencing reality with the heart and not the mind, which is how they describe it most basically, and which historically in Sufi literature is termed *ma'rifa*, or gnostic/intuitive knowledge. They contrast this with what they describe as airy-mind-expanding and overly intellectualized disembodied practices of other spiritual paths, such as new-age iterations of Buddhism and Vedic religion.¹⁸

Yet by offering content on the Insight Timer mobile app, USHS has situated its practices side by side with these very types of practices and in an openly competitive environment—a meditation marketplace. The concern that senior teachers in this community have with mixing Sufi practices with other religious or spiritual paths (such as Buddhism), for example, seems not to be a concern with losing members to competing communities, but rather a concern that walking two distinct religious paths at once can have a detrimental effect upon one's mental and spiritual development. Insight Timer's platform is antithetical to this outlook with its plethora of offerings of spiritual practices that are glossed 'meditations,' and for the loose (i.e., non-precise) labeling of these practices it not only allows, but indirectly encourages; to reach more users, teachers can give generic religious labels to their practices and in the landscape of new-age spiritualism, historically and culturally accurate designators are often tossed away. Consider, for example, how many movement-based practices are labeled as 'yoga' today in North America. The range is so broad and the common denominator among them so vague that the term is rendered a nearly empty signifier. USHS's practices on the app are more traditional *dhikrs* and yet they sit alongside 'meditations' that have few to zero recognizably Islamic Sufi characteristics; the latter render the term 'Sufi' a nearly empty signifier on the app.

A benefit for USHS in contributing to the app lies in making its onground practices accessibly remotely; anyone can participate in a guided practice wherever they are. For members of this Sufi order, many of whom live far from Shadhiliyya Sufi centers, practices on the mobile app that directly replicate what they would practice in onground community gatherings allow for a home practice that is not so lonely as it might be otherwise. The voice of a fellow beloved, the guidance of the *dhikr* repetitions, and the *bismillah* said by a teacher at the beginning all simulate an onground community practice, guiding the individual

Sufi student in their practice in any setting they wish. In interview, the teacher of the *Al-Wasi* practice explained,

[for me] sometimes it's just nice, when you feel a connection, even if it's just with another voice [that's digital]...there's something that happens when people connect, there's a stronger spiritual resonance. On Insight Timer in general you can see how many people are meditating: it's another thing about, oh I'm not alone.

The benefit to individual members of the community then is the connection the app-based practice allows for simulating community; a connection is created as the individual joins in with the voice of the person leading the meditation.

Yet, upon discussing the intention behind posting the practices on Insight Timer, she observed,

We were trying to reach people who were like-minded, to increase our student body—get the word out there that Sufism even exists, to get more students—it was more about outreach for the University. Trying to come up with ways to get people from outside our [Sufi] bubble. And to put it out there that the University is here and we have resources that we are offering. And there's the benefit is that it's maybe a service (to the community) as well.¹⁹

For USHS, posting on Insight Timer serves as a way to introduce Islamic tradition, and Sufism in particular, to people who would otherwise not know of it, and in turn these people might connect with this Sufi community, attend the Sufi University (USHS) and contribute to building its programs within the larger Shadhiliyya Sufi community.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

A central question that emerges in this exploration is how the presentation of certain practices on an app such as Insight Timer allows for new encounters with religion by users not intending to engage directly in particular religious practices, but rather in some form of mindfulness and meditation more generally. The practices on this app may serve as a way for people to experiment with new religions through the digital forms of religious practices, or hybrid new forms of these religions, in shopping for and 'trying on' religious practices that they might not feel

comfortable just walking into onground. For those types of users, the app format allows for a degree of privacy in this experimentation, and/or for students of Sufism in general, to engage in Sufi ritual practices in their own spaces. These digital productions also foster and facilitate the enactment of hybridity in one's individual religious practice and spirituality. For the Sufi community affiliated with USHS, the digital productions of USHS allow for a potential expansion of the community by reaching out to new members, as well as the secondary benefit (from USHS's perspective) of offering community members a point of connection in their practices and an ongoing commitment to the study and practice of Sufism. The app provides a place for these Sufi practices to reside and to be accessed by community members any time, any place.

In the erasure of Islam from the descriptions of the Sufi 'meditation' practices; however, the app's Sufi meditation offerings further an image that Islamic practices are incompatible with meditative and reflective practice. What does this mean for a community that is already on the wrong side of the digital divide (Ernst 2005) to be situated in this way in a marketplace of spiritual practices? In one way, and the way intended by USHS, it has the potential to draw open-minded spiritual seekers to the practices to enjoy them and then discover that Sufism and Islamic spirituality exist, and, might be right for them. In USHS's case, it is a carefully thoughtout choosing of labels and terms that are the most open and appropriate to Insight Timer's audience as is possible and that is done 'with integrity, for the specific audience.'

The meditations on the Insight Timer app open a wide range of possible new formations of individual religiosity/spirituality building and exposure to non-Sufis and non-Muslims to practices labeled (whether accurately or not) as Sufi or Islamic. In the case of USHS's Sufi 'meditations,' these new formations rely in part upon the elision of Islamic signifiers from 'meditations' that have Islamic roots as Sufi *dhikr* and are among the core religious practices of the Sufi community. Their presence on the app makes them available to non-community members in the absence of experience in the onground community, in which the larger context of Islam and Sufism is clear and pervasive. In the case of non-USHS meditations in the Sufism category that have little to no Islamic or Sufi grounding, this can mean a furthering of misconceptions about what Islam is and is not. But also, in this way, the elision of religion—here Sufism and Islam—on a meditation app has, paradoxically, the potential to expand certain (Sufi and Islamic) religious communities

and institutions, and challenges how we understand the modes through which people encounter and represent religion.

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NOTES

1. Personal communication May 17, 2019.
2. According to Insight Timer's webpage, it was started one year ago by its CEO Christopher Plowman, has 3000 teachers, and 'features guided meditations and talks from the world's top meditation teachers and mindfulness experts, neuroscientists, psychologists and lecturers from Stanford, Harvard, the University of Oxford and more.' It is based in the UK. <https://insighttimer.com/about> [accessed April 11, 2019].
3. 'Sufi' refers most broadly to a set of traditions within Islam referred to in English as Sufism (derived from *tassawaf* in Arabic). For more on Islamic Sufism see Buehler (2016), and Green (2012).
4. In this essay, I do not intend to make broad, totalizing claims about the place of Sufism and Sufi practices in the vast terrain of mobile apps, but rather begin an inquiry thorough the lens of one app and one Sufi community.
5. I use the term 'marketplace' in the sense of a landscape of religious seekers within a capitalist context that involves competition for seekers, similar to what Wade Clark Roof at the turn of the millennium described as a 'spiritual marketplace.' This landscape is now expanded and transformed through the emergence of digital religion, of which mobile apps are but one part. See Roof (2001).
6. For more on the historical roots of this order in America and its early formation in California see Bazzano (2020). On Sufism in North America more broadly see Dickson (2015).
7. <https://insighttimer.com> [accessed March 31, 2019].
8. Hindu goddess.
9. Outside the Islamic world, Rumi is frequently presented to audiences stripped of his cultural context and Islamic identity, themes, and content. This is even noted outside of academic literature. For example, a New Yorker article aptly titled 'The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry

- of Rumi' (Ali 2017). For more on this, see Sophia Rose Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (London: Oneworld, forthcoming in 2020).
10. It is not clear from the app whether Insight Timer has any oversight in the producer's categorizations of the practices they upload.
 11. The image is 'Muhammad at the Kaaba,' from *Siyer-i Nebi: The Life of the Prophet*. Istanbul, 1595. Pictures of this painting are found widely online.
 12. An extended greeting in Arabic that means "May the peace, mercy and blessings of Allah be upon you."
 13. The first words of the Quran repeated in prayer and recited as a blessing. It means 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.'
 14. Personal communication May 17, 2019.
 15. This hybridity of terminology is interesting to consider in light of the user's context: Mauritius is a Hindu majority country with a sizable Muslim population.
 16. Personal communication, May 13, 2019.
 17. Ibid.
 18. The reference to 'Vedic religion' seems to be based in some of the senior teachers' experiences with Transcendental Meditation decades before they became Sufi Muslims.
 19. Personal communication, May 17, 2019.

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