On the fifteenth day of October of the year 1351, the well-known Shafi’ite jurist and author, Taqī-ad-dīn as-Subkī, released a legal opinion in reply to the following question addressed to him:

What is your opinion concerning a man’s placing his foot upon a carpet into which there are woven some letters of the alphabet arranged in meaningful words such as “blessing,” “bliss,” “enduring strength”? Is it permissible for a man to step on the portions of the carpet where these words are found?1

In his reply, as-Subkī is inclined to consider it forbidden for a man to step on such a carpet, although he says he is unable to offer sufficiently strong proof for his opinion. Decisive proof would be necessary because an express prohibition by the Lawgiver, or reasoning based on sound analogy, is required in order to declare something forbidden. He has no doubt, however, that he is dealing with something that is to be classified as disapproved. There are people who do consider it forbidden on the strength of the argument that every letter of the alphabet is indicative of one of God’s most beautiful names. However, this argument is not specific enough. Then, there are those speculations of “the science of letters,” attributing magical and physical properties to individual letters. Some of those speculations are clearly sinful and classified as disapproved; others he has found through his own experience to be untrue.

Since these arguments cannot be used to decide the question, as-Subkī bases his opinion on an argument which runs somewhat as follows. The Qur’ān refers to God repeatedly as the “Creator of everything.” The letters of the alphabet are to be included in the expression “everything.” They are sections of the sound

1 1 *Fatāwī*, II, 563–565.
complexes that are accidents of the bodies created by the Lord; thus, they are created together with them in the second or third place. Everything created by God has its specific purpose. This purpose must be taken into consideration by man whenever he uses something. It is inherent in the thing by virtue of the act of creation, or it is fixed by the religious law. Any improper use of something is permissible only if sanctioned by the Lawgiver. The Prophetic traditions include the story of the cow that spoke up and protested against being used for riding purposes. Anyone who argues that a cow can be used for riding must bring special proof for his contention, or he may use the argument that riding on them was one of the secondary purposes for which cows were created, even if their primary and obvious purpose, which is always stressed, is that they be used for plowing. Hence, the letters—and here we can observe the almost universal failure of mediaeval scholars to make a clear-cut distinction between sound and letter—were created in order to produce, by means of their proper arrangement, the word of God and Muḥammad and of the other prophets and the angels as well as other necessary, desirable, or permissible utterances. There can be no doubt as to the correctness of the assumption that the fact that the letters are used for the production of something necessary or desirable makes it obligatory upon human beings to honor and reverence them. In the opinion of lawyers, a piece of paper containing the name of God cannot be used for writing on it secular stories or the like.2 In this case, of course, the situation is clear since the name of God is involved. But what if it is a case of ordinary letters that could be used for producing any word in the world? In this case, it is still possible to make a case for a similar prohibition, since it is not necessary to prove the complete identity of two cases but merely to prove the fact that they share certain legal characteristics (causa legis).

An objection may be raised, his argument continues, to the effect that the same letters that are used to indicate good and holy words may be used to indicate evil words and words of unbelief. While this is true, it must be stated that the letters were created for the former purpose. Like anything else, they may be employed by human beings to serve either their proper purpose or a contrary purpose.

In the latter case, however, we are dealing with an unjust and improper action which as such is to be classified as forbidden. In this sense, some scholars have gone so far as to wash each time before touching a piece of paper. Paper can be used for writing down either good words or evil words. However, the

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2 Some examples of the reverence shown by pious men for pieces of paper that may contain the name of God, in H. Ritter, Das Meer der Seele, 295, 270 (Leiden 1955).