

Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives¹

Since our first book on the philosophy of Mulla Sadra², whose metaphysics already recapitulates several centuries of the diverse influences of Ibn ‘Arabī in the Eastern Islamic world, many of our studies have been devoted to exploring and articulating the extraordinary influences of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works both in the past and throughout the contemporary world.³ Our lengthy study of *Ibn Arabi and His Interpreters* (*JAOS*, 1986-87) attempted to survey the broad historical outlines of the multi-faceted influences of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings and teachings both in the pre-modern Islamic world, but also in terms of the rapidly growing and increasingly diverse interests of contemporary Western translators and interpreters.

Since that initial overview (written in 1985), we have continued to provide in a number of writings—synthetic studies, more focused original research, and a host of reviews of relevant publications—a broader perspective on the range and significance of the phenomenal ‘explosion’ of translations, studies and introductions to Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings that has since taken place, at an accelerating pace, over the past two decades. Above all, two major new historical developments have become clear in that intervening period. First, that the range of interests and uses of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings in Western languages and cultures mirrors very closely the immense spectrum we had already found and experienced, in the centuries since his death, throughout the Islamic world. And secondly, that the intensity and depth of cross-cultural interactions, and the common spiritual and practical challenges and circumstances engaging human beings on a global scale, have converged to such a radical extent that by now it would be false and entirely misleading to continue to speak seriously of distinct ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ spheres and processes of influence, interest and creative adaptation.

Thus, the article which we have reproduced first in this packet (*Ibn ‘Arabī in the "Far West": Visible and Invisible Influences*)—originally prepared, tellingly enough, for a recent conference held in Kyoto on ‘Ibn ‘Arabī’s influences in Asia’—focuses on many of the key contemporary strands of Ibn ‘Arabī’s influences among originally ‘Western’ audiences, but in ways whose manifestations (e.g., through English and French translations, or scholarly editions) now are rapidly felt and ‘echoed’ on a much wider global scale.⁴ Equally

¹© James W. Morris. The computer files included in this packet are all *unrevised, pre-publication* versions of the revised and corrected articles and reviews cited in this Introduction. If citing or distributing these materials in any format, please include full reference to the actual corrected publications. Thank you.

² *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980); reprint edition forthcoming 2002.

³ See especially Chapter 2 and the Conclusion of our most recent book, *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilization* (London, Archetype Press, 2002), which deal more ‘prospectively’ with the wider prophetic dimensions and implications of

⁴ In a recent lecture visit to Malaysia and Indonesia, we discovered that virtually all the major English translations and studies relating to Ibn ‘Arabī and his influential Muslim interpreters (by Wm. Chittick, S. Murata, and ourself) had been quickly translated into Indonesian within a few years of their publication. Our PhD student, Isobel Jeffrey, has just completed a dissertation—hopefully to be published soon—on the important role of the Ibn ‘Arabī Society in facilitating this worldwide network of scholarly activity, and Dr. Soha Taji-Farouki (Durham U.) is working on a new study of

importantly, this article makes explicit some fundamental theoretical observations about the ways in which the complex dimensions of historical ‘influences’ which once operated throughout the Islamic world are dramatically visible today on the contemporary scene in ways which have too often been egregiously neglected by traditional historians focused on explicit and ‘textual’ questions of transmission. The second article (“**Except His Face...**”: *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Legacy*) provides a simple, readily accessible overview of the different dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s interest and influence in earlier Islamic settings. Then the following much longer study (*Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality*) provides a more detailed articulation of the place of *writings* such as Ibn ‘Arabi’s in the much larger complex of the Islamic Humanities, in their complex local manifestations, throughout the Islamic world (sections immediately related to Ibn ‘Arabi are I-II and V-VIII).

The fourth article in this opening section is the original ‘*Ibn ‘Arabi and His Interpreters*’ (1986) [not yet included].

I. OVERVIEWS

Ibn ‘Arabi in the "Far West": Visible and Invisible Influences. In Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, XXIX (2001), pp. 87-122. [**HERE: pp. 1-28.**]

“**Except His Face...**”: *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Legacy.* In Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, vol. XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13. [**Here: pp. 1-14.**]

Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality. In Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies, ed. R. Herrera, New York/Berlin, Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 293-334. [**Here: pp. 1-47.**]

Ibn Arabi and His Interpreters. In Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 106 (1986), pp. 539-551 and pp. 733-756, and vol. 107 (1987), pp. 101-119. [*Separate .pdf file to be sent later*]

II. INFLUENCES IN THE PRE-MODERN ISLAMIC WORLD:

The following articles and reviews deal with different dimensions of the complex process of assimilation and manifold creative uses of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings and teachings throughout the Islamic world in the seven centuries following his death, concluding with the work of one of the major European figures involved in the introduction of his ideas into the mainstream of Western religious, artistic and psychological discourse in the twentieth century. The critical and polemic dimensions of this same historical process are dealt with in the following set of our articles and reviews (= section III. below).

Theophany or "Pantheism"?: the Importance of Balyani’s Risalat al-Ahadīya, and “la description de abū ‘abdallāh balyānī par jāmi.” In Horizons Maghrébins (Toulouse), special festschrift issue for Michel Chodkiewicz, no. 30 (1995), pp. 43-50 and 51-54. [**Here: pp. 1-11.**]

The Continuing Relevance of Qaysari’s Thought: Divine Imagination and the Foundation of Natural Spirituality. In Papers of the International Symposium on Islamic Thought in the

the growing influences of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works and ideas in contemporary Arab social and political thought.

XIIIth and XIVth Centuries and Daud al-Qaysari, ed. T. Koç, Kayseri (Turkey), 1998, pp. 161-171. [Here: pp. 1-7.]

La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination, by Jean Michot, Louvain, 1987. In the Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 107 (1987), no. 4, pp. 815-817. [Here: pp. 1-8.]

'Le *Kitâb al-Inbâh 'alâ Tariq Allâh* de 'Abdallâh Badr al-Habashî: un témoignage de l'enseignement spirituel de Muhyî l-Dîn Ibn 'Arabî,' ed. and tr. by Denis Gril, Annales Islamologiques XV, Cairo, 1979. In the Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society, vol. VI (1987), pp. 61-64.

La *Risâla de Safî al-Dîn Ibn Abî l-Mansûr Ibn Zâfir: Biographies des maîtres spirituels connus par un cheikh égyptien du vii^e/xiii^e siècle*, introduction, edition and translation by Denis Gril, Cairo, 1986. In Studia Islamica, vol. LXV (1987), pp. 171-173.

Manjhan, *Madhumâlatî: An Indian Sufi Romance*, translated by Simon Weightman and Aditya Behl, with S.M. Pandey. Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000. To appear in Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society, vol. XXXI (2002), pp. [tba]

Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art, by T. Burckhardt, tr. and ed. W. Stoddart, Albany, 1987. In Critical Review of Books in Religion-1989 (annual supplement to the JAAR/SBL), pp. 470-472.

III. LATER MUSLIM CRITICS AND POLEMICS:

One significant measure of the ongoing depth and centrality of Ibn 'Arabî's influences throughout the Islamic world, in ways which continue to be important down to the present day, is the frequency of polemics and public controversies involving his writing. In almost all such cases (including those apparent today), what is actually at stake in such polemics can best be understood in terms of close attention to particular controversial political and social issues in particular Islamic historical contexts. (We have yet to encounter a single polemic work, from any period, demonstrating any even remotely serious engagement with Ibn 'Arabî's actual thought and distinctive methods of investigation and teaching.) However, since the participants in such polemics were typically learned religious scholars, the public 'intellectuals' of their day, such controversies often do provide our only surviving documentary 'window' on the much wider social and cultural processes by which Muslims from all walks of life, especially throughout the Ottoman and eastern Islamic realms, eventually assimilated various aspects of Ibn 'Arabî's teaching.

An Arab "Machiavelli"? : Rhetoric, Philosophy and Politics in Ibn Khaldun's Critique of "Sufism". Chapter to appear in Proceedings of Harvard Ibn Khaldun Conference, ed. Roy Mottahedeh, Cambridge, Harvard, 2003 (title and publisher t.b.a). [Here: pp. 1-49.]

Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics, ed. Frederic de Jong & Bernd Radtke. Leiden, Brill, 1999. In *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2002), pp. 237-239.

Ibn 'Arabi and the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam, by Alexander Knysh, Albany, SUNY Press, 1999. In Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society, vol. XXVII (2000), pp. 75-81.

Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazâlî's "Best of All Possible Worlds," by E.L. Ormsby, Princeton, 1985. In Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, vol. 19, no. 1 (1985), pp. 109-112. [to be scanned]

IV. REVIEWS⁵ of More Recent Works by and about Ibn 'Arabī (1985-2002):

The following reviews of important new books by and about Ibn 'Arabī—first of translations, then of biographical works introducing Ibn 'Arabī and his main ideas, and finally of two foundational studies of key dimensions of his thought and teaching—help to bring up to date the comprehensive survey of related English and French publications (up to 1985) to be found in *'Ibn 'Arabī and His Interpreters'* (section I. above).

TRANSLATIONS:

Ibn 'Arabī: Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Lights, translated by Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito, Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 2001. To appear in Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. XXXI (2002), pp. ...

Le Livre de dévoilement des fruits du voyage, d'Ibn 'Arabi. Edition and translation by Denis Gril, Combas, éditions de l'éclat, 1994. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. XVII (1995), pp.103-105.

The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of the Imagination, by William Chittick, Albany, 1989. In Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 111.3 (1991), pp. 601-602.

La vie merveilleuse de Dhū-l-Nūn l'Egyptien, by Ibn 'Arabī, tr. Roger Deladrière, Paris, Sindbad, 1988. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. X (1991), pp. 71-74.

Traité de l'amour, d'Ibn 'Arabī, tr. Maurice Gloton, Paris, 1986. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. XI (1989), pp. 77-79.

La Niche des lumières: 101 saintes paroles prophétiques... [= the Mishkât al-Anwâr of Ibn 'Arabī], tr. M. Vâlsan, Paris, 1983; and *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in early Islam*, by W. A. Graham, Paris/the Hague, 1977. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. V (1986), pp. 66-68.

L'alchimie du bonheur parfait, by Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī, tr. S. Ruspoli, Paris, 1981. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. IV (1985), pp. 59-64. [*to be scanned*]

Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī'ite Iran, by Henry Corbin (tr. N. Pearson), Princeton, 1977 (pb. 1989). In Iranian Studies, vol. 28 (1995), pp. 110-111.

BIOGRAPHIES (w. introductions):

The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabī, by Stephen Hirstenstein, Oxford, Anqa Publishers/White Cloud Press, 1999. In The Expository Times, vol. 111, no. 2 (August 2000), page 395.

Ibn 'Arabi et le Voyage sans Retour, by Claude Addas, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1996. In Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society, vol. XXIII (1998), pp. 90-92.

Ibn 'Arabī, ou la quête du soufre rouge, by Claude Addas, Paris, Gallimard, 1988. In Studia Islamica, vol. LXX (1989), pp. 185-187.

⁵ In almost all cases below, the uneven length and coverage of different reviews was originally dictated by the specific editorial policies and length restrictions of the journals concerned; shorter reviews should not be taken as any indication of the significance and depth of the books in question.

TEACHINGS AND ANALYTICAL STUDIES:

Un Océan sans rivage: Ibn 'Arabî, le livre et la loi, by Michel Chodkiewicz, Paris, Seuil, 1992. In Journal of the American Oriental Society, vol. 116 (1996), pp. [to be scanned].

An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law, by Michel Chodkiewicz (tr. D. Streight), Albany, SUNY Press, 1993. In Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society, vol. XV (1995), pp. 87-90.

Le Sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabî, by Michel Chodkiewicz, Paris, 1986. In Studia Islamica, LXIII (1986), pp. 182-185.

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Ibn 'Arabî in the 'Far West': Visible and Invisible Influences¹

It may be helpful to begin this article by highlighting what should be obvious: that each regular reader of this *Journal*, and every serious student of Ibn 'Arabî, should be able to amplify—often at radically greater length—its few concrete illustrations of the multitude of 'invisible' (to textual historians), but nonetheless quite specific and 'objective', ways in which Ibn 'Arabî continues to influence people from virtually every culture and walk of life in the contemporary world. And if those readers should happen to turn their attention to that wider spectrum of less outwardly demonstrable 'spiritual' influences which were both the subject and the guiding intention of so much of Ibn 'Arabî's own writing and life's work (but which are normally carefully excluded by today's general norms of scholarly research and publication), then the simple phenomenology of the Shaykh's deeper influences would no doubt require not an essay, but a substantial book for many individuals. The point of those initial, common-sensical observations—and hopefully the wider interest of this particular case-study—is to underline the severe *limitations* of the available tools, both of written sources and of conceptual and methodological assumptions, which are still normally used by historians and students of religion (perhaps especially in the recondite fields of Islamic studies) when they approach these same recurrent issues of intellectual and religious 'influence' with regard to so many other key figures in our past. By focusing on the complex, but undeniable web of such influences which each of us naturally encounters and normally takes for granted in the course of life—but which will soon be entirely invisible to most future philologists and historians of texts—we can perhaps suggest some of the key facets of that necessary historical *imagination* which is indispensable for

¹ This is a revised and abridged version of a paper earlier prepared for the International Conference on '*Ibn 'Arabî and the Islamic World: Spread and Assimilation*' at the University of Kyoto, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, January 19-23, 2001, and also draws on related essays presented at in two earlier international symposia devoted to the 'heritage of Ibn 'Arabî' which were held in Murcia, Spain in 1996 and Marrakech, Morocco in 1997. Special thanks are due to the organisers and fellow participants all three of those events

reconstructing and adequately rediscovering the intellectual, religious and spiritual life of the past.

We begin with an anecdote that epitomises many of the key points elaborated below. A little more than a decade ago, several scholarly students of Ibn ‘Arabi were invited—along with other authorities in Christian and Islamic ‘mysticism’—to participate in an international conference in New York on the Spanish Jewish thinker and reformer Nachmanides; they were asked to provide a comparative historical and philosophic perspective on parallels to Nachmanides’ thought in the cognate Christian and Muslim traditions of medieval Spain, including those which are so profusely illustrated in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings. At some point in those proceedings, after the name of Ibn ‘Arabi and his ideas had been repeatedly evoked throughout the conference discussions, a famous professor of Christian mysticism at our table leaned over and remarked: *‘If Ibn ‘Arabi didn’t exist, someone would have had to invent him!’*

I have never forgotten that moment for two reasons, both of which are at the heart of my observations in this article. First of all, the eminent professor was simply pointing out publicly something that is historically quite accurate, even if the underlying actors and actual historical processes are not nearly so widely recognised: the academic field of the ‘study of religions’ as it is today practised and taught in the West (and more particularly in North America) owes a large part of its basic, most often implicit, premises and conceptual framework—above all where the spiritual dimensions of religious life and phenomenology are concerned—to writers and teachers whose thought was profoundly influenced by the leading ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi (and therefore ultimately, one might add, by the conception of Religion, *al-Dîn*, developed throughout the Qur’an). But the second reason that professor’s remark was so striking is that in reality Ibn ‘Arabi’s far-reaching influence in the West has remained for the most part ‘invisible’ and unknown to all but a handful of scholarly specialists. Indeed, at the time that remark was made there was still no extended translation in any Western language of any representative sections of Ibn ‘Arabi’s magnum opus, the *‘Meccan Illuminations’*. So the closest that particular professor (and most of his learned audience there) were likely to have ever approached the actual words of Ibn ‘Arabi was quite indirectly through the profound, but nonetheless partial, studies by Toshihiko Izutsu or Henry Corbin.

So a fundamental reason for discussing Ibn ‘Arabî’s recent influences in Europe and North America in the particular context of historical ‘spread and assimilation’ (the focus of the recent Kyoto conference) is that by pointing out the remarkable depth, scope and varied nature of the ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî which we can all directly observe in our own short lifetimes—virtually none of which would even be discernible by the traditional scholarly methods of studying the historical spread of an author’s writings and direct citations and overt discussion of their contents—I may thereby suggest something of the actual, almost unimaginable richness of the unseen and still largely unexplored paths and fields of influence of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings throughout the Islamic world *in the past*, a richness which can only be very remotely suggested when one focuses (as intellectual historians naturally do) on such visible, relatively well-studied figures as the famous commentators of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, the influential poets Jâmî and Hamza Fansûrî, philosophers like Mulla Sadra and Shah Waliullah, or even Khomeini in our own time.

However, before mentioning specific figures and periods and the manifold paths of influence of Ibn Arabi in the ‘West’, it is surely helpful to stand back and notice one initial and extraordinary paradox: how can we even begin to speak of such influences, on an initially entirely ‘non-Islamic’ culture, by a thinker whose thoughts are expressed almost exclusively—indeed far more than any number of other Islamic philosophers, poets, artists and musicians—in terms and symbols expressly drawn from the Qur’an and the hadith, or from their even more unfamiliar elaborations in all the later Islamic religious sciences? Not surprisingly, much of the historical influence of Ibn ‘Arabî throughout Islamic history can be explained precisely by that fundamental rootedness of his thought in every detail of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s teachings: for as a result, Ibn ‘Arabî has constantly provided (and still does today) an indispensable and powerfully effective theologico-political instrument for defending and supporting creative spiritual movements of all sorts in predominantly Islamic cultural and political settings.²

² See the following articles on different, but equally important facets of this long historical process: *Ibn Arabî and His Interpreters*, *JAOS* 106 (1986), pp. 539-551, 733-756, and 107 (1987), pp. 733-756; *Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority*, in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), pp. 37-64; *Situating Islamic ‘Mysticism’: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality*, in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R. Herrera, New York/Berlin, Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 293-334; and ‘*Except His Face...*’: *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s Legacy*, in *JMIAS* XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13.

Accordingly, one would normally expect that dense scriptural and symbolic allusiveness to form an almost impenetrable barrier to serious comprehension of his ideas by those from other civilisational and religious backgrounds. And indeed this paradox helps highlight and partially explains the mysterious—but certainly indispensable—alchemical ‘*translation*’ of the Shaykh’s intentions into more understandable Western terms and diverse creative expressions, in various domains of life, which typifies each of the seminal figures we shall briefly mention below.

At the same time, the extraordinary success of that process of ‘translation’, in so many different recent non-Islamic settings, surely has something to do as well with the essential *intentions* underlying and orienting all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work. To begin with, one can say that the aim of all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings (or at least all those I have encountered) can be readily summarised as the development of *spiritual intelligence*: it is the *joining* of these two terms—spirit *and* intellect—that is so unique in his work (whether within or beyond his original Islamic context); and it is their essential connection that basically explains both the perennial appeal of his writing for some, and its perennially troubling and subversive effects for others. Islam, like other religions and civilisations, has produced uncounted exponents of practical spirituality, as well as a considerable number of articulate philosophic and scientific defenders of the universal dimensions of human intelligence. However, intellectually cogent proponents of the universality and intelligibility of *spiritual* life are far rarer; and few, if any, of those can match the self-consciously universal *phenomenological* scope of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings. In other words, each of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings is carefully designed to move his properly prepared readers from the experiential ‘phenomena’ of their spiritual life to an unfolding perception of the universal laws and regularities (the ‘Reality’, *al-Haqq* or *haqîqa*) underlying those phenomena.

Once that necessarily personal and individual connection (between what the particular symbolic forms of what he calls the revealed divine ‘paths’ and their common ultimate Ground) has been made, the qualified reader of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works can immediately recognise the same phenomenological patterns in previously unfamiliar cultural and religious settings. When that necessarily empirical, experiential process of lifelong spiritual discovery (what Ibn ‘Arabî called *tahqîq*) has become sufficiently established, it leads to a concretely grounded realisation of three essential facts: (1) the *necessary individuality* and universality of the process of spiritual realisation, with all that recognition implies, including (2) the corresponding *multiplicity of paths* of realisation, at all times and under all circumstances; and (3) the ongoing, constant *necessity of*

creativity (in practice, communication, and wider social and political organisation) which is required to support and encourage that process of realisation in each particular case and circumstance.

In other words, that process of realisation which is at the very core of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work is both radically subversive of attempts at socio-political indoctrination and delimitation of individual spiritual life, and at the same time radically activist and creative (and potentially quite political) in the responsibilities it unfolds for those who take it seriously. When those three basic features of his work are clearly understood, the many obvious differences between the individuals and movements mentioned briefly below can be readily grasped as the necessary unfolding of those demands of realisation according to the specific circumstances in which each of those creative figures have found themselves.

The Problem of ‘Influences’ and the Parameters of Communication :

In the course of the discussions of the ‘spread and assimilation’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought at the conferences mentioned above, it became evident we need to examine more closely the different ways (and the underlying processes) in which we can speak of different ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings. Perhaps the most frequent source of misunderstandings in this regard has to do with the peculiar widespread identification of Ibn ‘Arabî, in so many later milieus, with a single book among his vast literary production, his ‘Bezels of Wisdom’ (*Fusûs al-Hikam*). More particularly, those recurrent misconceptions are often deeply rooted in the strange conjunction of two very different (and often quite unrelated) sets of long-lived historical phenomena: that is, between (a) widespread later movements of Islamic philosophy and religious thought deeply rooted in the study and commentary of the *Fusûs*; and (b) polemical ‘images’ and deeply distorted accounts of the Shaykh’s ideas and intentions, drawn almost exclusively from a few ‘scandalous’ phrases of the *Fusûs*, which were usually connected with the ongoing struggles for power and ‘authority’ (in all senses of that term) between competing social, intellectual and political interpreters of Islam from the 15th century down to the present day.³ A further obstacle or distorting assumption more common in modern times is the additional identification of Ibn

³ See especially A. Knysh: *Ibn ‘Arabi and the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*, (Albany, SUNY Press, 1999), and our review in *JMIAS*, XXVII (2000), pp. 75-81.

‘Arabî and his ideas and influences with that vast range of cultural forms, institutions and social phenomena vaguely associated by both friendly and hostile commentators, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, with what they assume to be ‘Sufism’ (always taken to be somehow ‘different’ from ‘Islam’ or other key areas of Islamic culture and religious life). So it may be important to start out by emphasising that the manuscript evidence for the study and transmission of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works—even in that most accessible body of evidence only partially provided (with an obvious emphasis on Turkish and Egyptian libraries) in O. Yahya’s classic bio-bibliographic survey⁴—suggests that writings like the *Futûhât* and especially his shorter treatises on spiritual practice have also been continuously studied by large numbers of Muslims over many centuries in virtually every area of the Muslim world; the instances of a profusion of alternative descriptive ‘titles’ for so many of his shorter works are particularly telling in this regard.⁵

Perhaps the simplest way to confront these stereotypes and the resulting misunderstandings that can easily keep us from perceiving the full scope of Ibn ‘Arabî’s influences and intentions is to take up each of the most common misconceptions in turn and then to look at the corresponding actual state of affairs. In all of this, there is nothing particularly difficult or ‘esoteric’: each of the following points can be very quickly verified by anyone who takes up the practical challenge of communicating and explaining any particular writing of Ibn ‘Arabî to a fairly diverse audience (whether of students or adults) with varying intellectual, artistic and spiritual sensitivities; different cultural, educational and religious backgrounds; and a fair range of ages and life experiences.⁶

⁴ *Histoire et classification de l’oeuvre d’Ibn ‘Arabî* (Damascus, I.F.D., 1964), in two volumes.

⁵ In Yahya’s repertoire of Ibn ‘Arabî’s extant writings, one finds that his classic shorter works on practical spirituality like the *R. al-Anwâr*, *K. al-Nasâ’ih*, and *K. al-Kunh* are each extant under literally dozens of descriptive or mnemonic titles. The extension of Yahya’s work to so-called ‘peripheral’ areas of the Islamic world (China, South and Southeast Asia, the Balkans, etc.) would provide the material for many fascinating studies; see in particular the contributions to Kyoto conference by W. Chittick, B. Ahmad, S. Murata and A. Matsumoto, summarising each scholar’s essential research in some of those relatively unexplored geographical and cultural regions.

⁶ Many of the observations below about the motivations and capacities of understanding Ibn ‘Arabî’s works among non-academic specialists are based on extensive classroom experience (using both my own and other English translations) with more than a thousand religious studies (1988-1999), as well as on more intensive workshop and seminar presentations in several countries over the same period. The ‘audiences’ in both cases have normally included a substantial number of Muslims from many different regional, cultural and sectarian backgrounds.

1. To begin with, Ibn ‘Arabî nowhere suggests that his writings are meant to be studied simply as ‘literature’, in separation from other equally indispensable contextual elements of practical experiential preparation and appropriate spiritual guidance and intention. On the contrary, all of his works that have survived are clearly intended as useful means or vehicles for actually understanding (a) the recurrent patterns and underlying meanings of our human spiritual experiences (the Qur’anic divine ‘*Signs on the horizons and in their souls*’); and (b) particular forms of revelation and scripture (and corresponding spiritual practice) precisely insofar as they are central practical keys to the deeper understanding of that necessarily individual experience.

2. To put the same point slightly differently, Ibn ‘Arabî nowhere suggests that study and intellectual comprehension of his writings (or of any other texts, including revealed scriptures) is adequate *alone* as an end in itself, without intimate ongoing interplay with the actual results and contexts of spiritual practice. (This point alone is certainly sufficient to distinguish him radically from many Islamic schools of philosophy and of theology.) Even when he is discussing the most abstruse topics in logic, cosmology, ontology, kalâm, etc., it is always quite clear from the context that the purpose of such discussions has to do with either dispelling recurrent illusions and obstacles on the spiritual path, or in clarifying the implications (and concomitantly, the limitations) of those forms of spiritual experience and illumination which each reader first has to experience and bring to the text in order for the purpose and meaning of that specific text to become apparent.

3. Despite the profusion of newly coined expressions, radically altered meanings (of familiar terms), and technical or symbolic vocabulary to be found throughout Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings—and the most accessible and extensive summary of such distinctive usages is surely still S. al-Hakîm’s monumental ‘Sufi Dictionary’ (*al-Mu‘jam al-Sûfî*)—any serious student of Ibn ‘Arabî quickly becomes aware that all of that new terminology is essential poetic or ‘dialectical’ in nature. That is to say, it arises most often in his writing in the context of previously disputed interpretations (intellectual, practical or both) about the proper meaning (or appropriate *way to approach the meanings*) of Islamic scripture (Qur’an and hadith), where it functions as a spiritual catalyst for helping to resolve and eliminate the various intellectual and practical obstacles to discovering that actual meaning in the reality of one’s own spiritual experience. Or else such new terminology originates, particularly in the early works written before Ibn ‘Arabî’s emigration from Andalusia and N. Africa, as a poetic, allusive expression for

his own personal experiences of realisation. The essential thing here—and the choice of formulation is intentionally provocative, but also quite literally accurate—is that *Ibn ‘Arabî* (like Plato) *has no ‘teachings’ or ‘doctrines’ of his own*. In other words, his constant emphasis and is to force his ‘readers’ to undertake their own indispensable effort of *tahqîq* (both ‘verification’ and ‘realisation’). That is, they are intended to help his readers discover the essential *connections* between the ‘forms’ of revelation (or their endless social and historical transmutations) and their underlying realities as revealed in each individual’s experience; and then to help them actualise the further demands of that *haqq*⁷ which are inherent in its ongoing discovery.

4. A further implication of each of the above-mentioned points is that Ibn ‘Arabî has no single or exclusive ‘audience’ for which his writings are intended. In particular, the interpreter of any of his typical works is faced in this regard with a strange double paradox. First, it is readily apparent that most of those ‘people of God’ (to use Ibn ‘Arabî’s own pregnant expression for his true companions and ideal readers) who would be uniquely qualified to understand these strange writings, in his time or any other, do *not* ordinarily devote most of their time to reading books and pursuing similar intellectual pursuits. Yet most of Ibn ‘Arabî’s *writings* presuppose nonetheless an rare and challenging intellectual mastery of religious and philosophic sciences and Arabic literary forms which must have been relatively uncommon even in his own day (not to mention our own). The second, further paradox is the extraordinary, lasting (indeed often lifelong) interest which those writings have nonetheless for centuries tended to awaken and sustain in so many devoted students and readers, as evidenced by the profusion of well-annotated manuscripts in the past, and of extensive translations, elaborate studies and Arabic editions more recently. An adequate resolution of this puzzle would require a book in itself, but two basic preliminary observations can already be noted here. First, even a cursory reader of Ibn ‘Arabî’s works will quickly notice that he was deeply suspicious of the increasingly institutionalised forms of what would later be called ‘Sufism’ that he encountered during his lifetime, for perennial reasons (not at all limited to the historical or individual particularities of that age) that

⁷ This underlying Arabic term, a favourite of Ibn ‘Arabî, encompasses both the divine ‘Reality’ and all that is right and due or obligatory as an inseparable dimension of that same Reality.

may in fact constitute some of his most important lessons.⁸ Secondly, his voluminous treatment of all the forms of the Islamic ‘religious sciences’ is not simply intended to point his readers toward the spiritual meanings potentially expressed exclusively in that revelation and its diverse historical interpretations. By natural extension (as we can see vehemently reflected in the extensive spectrum of Ibn ‘Arabî’s later and present-day Muslim critics), his distinctive approach to Islamic scripture and its interpretation also constitutes a massive body of profoundly ‘constructive criticism’ of many existent (mis-)interpretations, and a concomitant inspiration to the—unstated but omnipresent—challenges of creative and positive revivification of the wider intentions and perennial goals of all revelation.

Now if we bring together each of the *positive* counterparts to the recurrent misconceptions we have briefly enumerated above, we can perhaps more easily conceive of the complexities involved in envisaging and ‘capturing’ (from the historian’s very limited perspective) the multiple dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘influences’ on anyone who has begun to understand what he actually demands of his readers. This is especially important, of course, in that vast majority of cases where history has subsequently hidden an individual’s original contact with Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings.⁹ Indeed here we have only look to the situation today of a student of Ibn ‘Arabî in virtually any contemporary nation-state with a majority Muslim population (or any such student whose livelihood and identity are primarily developed within a minority Muslim community): there we can readily see that in almost all such cases today it would normally be decidedly unconstructive (if not dangerously self-destructive) to highlight Ibn ‘Arabî as the

⁸ In the following discussion of Ibn ‘Arabî’s contemporary ‘influences’ in the West, we have suggested several key reasons why most of the individuals publicly involved (whether ‘Sufi’ or not) have taken considerable pains *not* to draw undue attention either to Ibn ‘Arabî or to the various cultural (including ‘Islamic’) contexts in which they may have first encountered the Shaykh’s influence. To have emphasized either point would have meant both cutting themselves off from many of their potential audiences and—far more importantly—running the risk of short-circuiting the necessarily creative and ongoing demands of the process of realisation in favour of a spiritually ruinous ‘idolatry’ of particular social and cultural forms. That dilemma is *never* escaped, and—from Ibn ‘Arabî’s perspective—was surely just as poignant in the time and surroundings of each of the prophets as it is centuries later.

⁹ A particularly striking example, both in the past and down to the present day, is R.W. Holbrooke’s marvellous article on the group of heads of the main Sufi orders in Istanbul who would regularly meet to study and discuss Ibn ‘Arabî’s works: see *Ibn ‘Arabî and the Ottoman Dervish Traditions: The Melâmî Supra-Order, Part I*, pp. 18-35 in the *Journey of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabî Society (JMIAS)*, IX (1991), pp. 18-35; and Part II, XII (1992), pp. 15-33.

actual source of one's particular religious understanding and creative religious and social ideas.¹⁰ For what should be equally obvious reasons, it would be similarly pointless or self-defeating for a teacher or interpreter (even in ostensibly 'tolerant' Western settings) primarily working with Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or avowedly 'secular' audiences and traditions to point out explicitly the central role of Ibn 'Arabî (or certain of the Shaykh's modern interpreters) in that teacher's own understanding and interpretation of the tradition in question¹¹—even though we all know personally such friends and colleagues from various religious backgrounds whose own shelves are well stocked with books by Ibn 'Arabî or especially his contemporary interpreters discussed below.

In short, once we recognise that Ibn 'Arabî's essential purpose, in any of his works, is the realisation of actual spiritual understanding which is necessarily 'translated' into a wider process of realisation and appropriate action, then we can readily see how each of the three equally indispensable parameters of communication—i.e., the particular *communicator* /translator/creator; the particular *operative symbols* (visual, musical, scriptural, cinematic, etc.) in the cultural and inner life of their audience; and the actual circumstances and possibilities of each particular *audience*—are necessarily constantly changing and requiring new, necessarily creative forms of communication which can remain spiritually efficacious only by appropriately adapting to all the ongoing changes in any of those three parameters. If we assume, that the most intelligent and capable of Ibn 'Arabî's students and readers were (and are) those who are able to most consciously and capably respond to those further demands of effective communication,

¹⁰ A somewhat ironical case is the way in which Ayatollah Khomeini's personal fascination with Ibn 'Arabî (growing out of his own lifelong scholarly specialisation in the study of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, and highlighted in his famous 'Letter to Gorbachev' shortly before his death) and his published super-commentary on the *Fusûs* have had the widespread effect of rendering the study and even the publication of the undoubtedly rigorously 'Sunni' works of Ibn 'Arabî more or less 'respectable' in Iran after they had spent centuries under considerable suspicion among Shiite clerical circles. Perhaps an equally dramatic illustration is provided by Prof. Paul Fenton's recent extraordinary discovery in a Jerusalem library of a Syrian manuscript of Ibn 'Arabî's very important *K. al-Tajalliyât* written in Judeo-Arabic characters. In light of what we are highlighting in this study, it is important to notice that such a remarkable manuscript could just as easily signify the *beginning* of a longer chain of 'influences' in an unexpected milieu (especially given the key ensuing developments of Jewish mysticism in nearby Safed) as much as the 'end' of the sorts of written evidence usually available to historical scholars.

¹¹ One should stress that such considerations are by no means limited to Ibn 'Arabî: the same considerations would be true as well for Christian (or Muslim) teachers teaching parts of the Bible in light of their study, for example, of a book like the *Zohar* (which offers endless parallels to Ibn 'Arabî's work).

then it is likely the case that in any age the great majority of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘influences’ and most effective ‘transmitters’ will necessarily remain hidden from the view of historians.¹² Thus the few contemporary examples we have enumerated below throw a fascinating light on that larger historical process precisely because we are in the privileged situation of being close enough to the actual creative actors and their audiences and circumstances to know something of Ibn ‘Arabî’s central role and ‘influences’ in their lives and creations. In each case, it is therefore fairly easy to see how those different parameters of communication have helped generate the particular forms of expression and creation in question.

Since the basic structure of these demands on anyone seeking to truly ‘communicate’ Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions to any range of audiences remains much the same across time and cultural boundaries, it may be helpful here to underline a handful of key practical observations which are equally relevant to the contemporary ‘Western’ cases discussed below as they are to the larger processes of ‘spread and assimilation’ of the Shaykh’s ideas in any earlier historical context. In particular, it is important to keep in mind what was the actual historical reality of the great centres of Islamic culture and intellectual, artistic and cultural creativity in that long period (14th-19th centuries) when Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas became so influential in so many different domains. For those crucial cultural centres in that period—the Ottoman heartlands (outside what we now call the ‘Arab world’), the Timurid and Safavid realms (including most of Central Asia and the Caucasus), the Mogul empire and many other Indian Muslim principalities, the trading entrepôts of Southeast Asia, and the centres of high Chinese culture—were all *locally* cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, multi-confessional and filled with vigorously competing forms of spiritual praxis in ways which can only be even mirrored today, if at all, on a much wider, global geographic scale.¹³ Once the concrete historical realities of those specific times and places are known, it is much easier to recognise their frequently close contextual parallels to the recent ‘Western’

¹² The ‘chance’ discoveries of V. Holbrooke and P. Fenton (notes 9 and 10 above) offer dramatic illustrations of such influences (actual or potential) which would otherwise have passed completely unknown.

¹³ Here it is essential to take into account not just the different ‘religions’ in the reified way they are often are popularly conceived today, but especially the multitude of socially effective, actively competing ‘schools’, ‘paths’, ‘sects’ and the like within any of the milieus in question. Today it is difficult for all but historical specialists in the periods in question to begin even to imagine the degree of

communicators and interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabî discussed below. Here are a few basic practical observations about these parameters of communication.

To begin with, as in our opening anecdote, the possible range of ‘influences’ in this domain are normally determined less by the efforts of the ‘communicator’ (teacher, shaykh, artist, etc.) in question than they are by the pre-existing spiritual ‘needs’ and aptitudes of each particular audience. Anyone teaching Ibn ‘Arabî or trying to communicate his writings quickly recognises that their natural, most immediate ‘audience’ is not at all academic philosophers or theologians—who typically can only see the conceptual interplay of ideas and concepts visible within their own familiar intellectual schemas—but rather those who are existentially driven to seek the ‘realities’ or ‘meanings’ (Ibn ‘Arabî’s own terms) underlying the symbols through which spiritual meanings are conveyed: that is, poets, musicians, artists, writers; or in more ‘vocational’ terms, psychologists, teachers, healers, parents and other therapists.

Secondly, with such audiences—whose primary motivation is the inner search for what is ‘Real’¹⁴—any teacher quickly discovers that Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and intentions are often immediately comprehensible without reference to any particular (formal or ‘official’) religious and cultural upbringing at all. Indeed vast amount of translators’ and teachers’ time must ordinarily be taken up with ‘deconstructing’ and eliminating potential contamination by the unrelated or misleading suggestions of his vast Islamic symbolic vocabulary, for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike—albeit in very different ways—in order for each student to begin to get at what Ibn ‘Arabî actually means in terms comprehensible to a modern audience. (Any translator or teacher of Ibn ‘Arabî can supply dozens of pertinent illustrations of this point.)

Thirdly, as soon as one begins to explore the area of the serious spiritual apprehension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions, his communicators—if they want to have any effect at all—are immediately forced to work with the symbols actually operative in the lives and souls of the particular audience and individuals they are addressing. With most contemporary audiences (usually including the non-traditional, educated classes of officially ‘Muslim’ countries), those operative symbols are not immediately, primarily or exclusively drawn from any particular

cultural and religious diversity which is extremely well-attested (both by travellers and internal witnesses) for so many parts of the present-day ‘Islamic world’ prior to the transformations of the past century.

¹⁴ See n. 7 above.

‘religious’ tradition. (Not incidentally, one suspects that this has in fact been the case with most non-clerical, non-‘educated’ populations in most pre-modern cultures as well.)¹⁵ In other words, one cannot begin to communicate Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in any serious way without constantly investigating and then rediscovering what those operative and effective symbols actually are for the people with whom one is interacting. The fact that in most contemporary contexts those effective symbolic fields turn out to be the present-day equivalent of what we now often naively take to be the ‘classical’ Islamic humanities—i.e., spiritually effective, familiar and therefore ‘popular’ visual and story imagery (= cinema today), music, innovative social and ritual forms, etc.—brings us to our last key observation.

Finally, the expanding waves of further ‘influences’ which grow out of the genuine individual comprehension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and intentions (as opposed to the facile ‘parroting’ of particular terms, practices, etc. which is also quite familiar to every teacher) can themselves only be expressed by further creative transformation and uses of the same context of shifting cultural and social possibilities (and ‘givens’) involved in each of preceding points. In particular, if those influences are lastingly effective, their original relation to Ibn ‘Arabî (and his symbols) will actually become *less and less apparent* with each successive ‘ripple’ of transmission and further spiritually effective work of creation and transformation.

Thus whenever we examine the following contemporary cases more closely, each individual facet of this larger process of transmission of ideas may resemble an adventure novel or spiritual autobiography more than what we usually think of as history.¹⁶ Certainly any detailed and remotely adequate ‘history’ of each individual and group mentioned briefly here

¹⁵ Thus the same necessary conditions of communication, on a wider scale, also explain the central factors affecting the development of the local ‘Islamic humanities’, using vernacular languages and familiar ‘local’ symbolisms and cultural forms (in poetry, music, and vast fields of associated ritual), first in ‘new Persian’ and subsequently in the many other Islamic languages in the course of the long development and spread of Islam as a world religion.

¹⁶ I must acknowledge Prof. Alexandre Popovic (the noted French authority on Sufism in the Balkans) for first making this point so explicitly to a group of curious Algerian interlocutors (at a conference on Ibn ‘Arabî in Oran in 1990) who were posing the perennial question, ‘How did you ever become interested in Ibn ‘Arabî [Islam, Sufism, etc.] in the first place?’ A similarly illuminating occasion was listening to a group of academic ‘experts’ on Ibn ‘Arabi (at a conference in Noto, Italy, in 1989) respond to the question of how each of them had actually first encountered and then became interested in the Shaykh: one suspects that a collection of those frank responses, if suitably detailed, would make a popular book both more intriguing and more spiritually effective than most academic studies in this field.

would be the subject of a long book. In this limited context, however, one can only mention only a few illustrative names and groups, remaining at the level of what is hopefully common public knowledge¹⁷ and focusing on the corresponding wider *audiences* for each of these transmitters, with their specific needs and creative uses of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas. And of course, in reality the individuals, influences and audiences mentioned schematically and successively here have often overlapped and influenced each other, sometimes in major ways.

*Guénon and His ‘Successors’*¹⁸:

According to students of this tradition, probably the first Western translation of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work (at least in modern times) dates from the beginning of the twentieth century, when a ‘*Treatise on (Divine) Unicity*’ apocryphally attributed to him was independently translated into French and English.¹⁹ For more than fifty years, the primary translations of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings

¹⁷ In many of the cases mentioned below the ‘proof’ of the influences of Ibn ‘Arabî would involve revealing personal confidences and private knowledge acquired over several decades of personal contact with a wide range of individuals directly involved in the various groups and situations described here only in very general terms. Even where written references have been cited below, in most cases they are useful only in situating and broadly describing groups and individuals alluded to here; phenomenologically accurate and in-depth descriptions in this area are still almost non-existent.

¹⁸ One uses the term ‘successor’ here only very reluctantly and as a concession to existing public usage, in the broadest sense of a particular subset of the many schools and individuals claiming ‘Guénonian’ roots and antecedents (many of which, particularly in France, have not focused explicitly or centrally on the role of Ibn ‘Arabî in his thought). Moreover, this language should *not* be taken to imply any sort of wider ‘dependence’ on Guénon (to the exclusion of many different sources, Islamic and other) or any general agreement with any of his particular pronouncements at different periods of his life. The actual diversity, disagreements and independence of thought and outlook one quickly discovers in studying the thought and life of each individual loosely associated with these ‘schools’ fully corresponds to all the radical diversity we discover in tracing Sufi ‘paths’, ‘lineages’ and succession processes throughout history—especially whenever a relatively ‘charismatic’ figure dies. For Guénon himself, the most useful biography (especially for his later life in Egypt) remains P. Chacornac, *La Vie simple de René Guénon*. (A forthcoming book on this subject announced by a professor at the American University in Cairo was not yet available at the time this essay was completed.)

¹⁹One of the additional ironies of this situation is that this initial text of ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’ translated into both English and French, the *Risâlat al-Ahadîya* (‘Essay on the Divine Unicity’) was actually the work of a later Persian Sufi author (al-Balyânî) with very different ideas and teachings from those of Ibn ‘Arabî himself. See the important historical material on the western discovery of Ibn ‘Arabî in Michel Chodkiewicz’ Introduction to his translation of Balyânî’s work, and the further discussion of this text in

available to wider audiences, including the first extended selections from his *Fusûs* and *Futûhât*, were in French.²⁰ The historically best-known element in this process, particularly in the French-speaking world, is the very broad and diverse ‘school’ of religious writers, translators and teachers loosely associated—to move down through the past century—with René Guénon, the Algerian Shaykh al-‘Alawî and the Shâdhilî Sufî tariqa (in both Egypt and North Africa), and eventually the writings of F. Schuon, T. Burckhardt, M. Lings, and the many other contributors to the journals *Études traditionnelles* and *Studies in Comparative Religion*. While all of these authors shared certain intellectual and, in most cases, initiatic connections, their perspectives and chosen fields of activity were also quite diverse, and we do not yet have anything approaching a comprehensive history of their personal, intellectual and artistic activities.²¹ Without entering

our review article on ‘*Ibn Arabî and His Interpreters*’ (n. 2 above) and in ‘Theophany or “Pantheism”?: the Importance of Balyânî’s *Risâlat al-Ahadîya*,’ in *Horizons Maghrébins* (Toulouse), special festschrift number for Michel Chodkiewicz, no. 30 (1995), pp. 43-50 and 51-54.

Further helpful historical context (albeit often rather superficial) is provided by related chapters in A. Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters* (Chicago, Open Court, 1997), and more useful material on F. Schuon is provided in M. Lings’ *A Sufî Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaykh Ahmad al-Alawî* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1971), S.H. Nasr’s introduction to his collection of *The Essential Writings of Fritjof Schuon* (NY, Amity House, 1986), and J. Cutsinger’s *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany, SUNY, 1997). In French, see the more comprehensive recent study, *Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998): connaissance et voie d’intériorité, Biographie, études et témoignages* (Paris, Connaissance des Religions, 1999).

²⁰ And also, of course, in Asin-Palacios’ pioneering Spanish studies of Ibn ‘Arabî’s life and the parallels between his eschatological writings (from the *Futûhât*) and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; however, it is fair to say that those writings Ibn ‘Arabî’s own presence and distinctive perspectives are often very hard to detect or to separate from the views of his translator/interpreter. The key authors whose translations certainly did the most to begin to make Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings available to non-academic circles were T. Burckhardt and M. Valsân, both in independent books and through their many contributions to the journal *Études traditionnelles*, in itself the most accessible historical source for all the contributors to this movement. (Unfortunately, other early European academic studies of Ibn ‘Arabî—especially Nyberg’s translations and editions—were of less representative works, and were accessible at best to a handful of academic specialists).

²¹ It is interesting that publications by the writers in question (including a large body of English translations) are in general far more accessible than any reliable biographical and critical studies (see notes 18-19 above). The bio-bibliographical study by J. Borella, ‘René Guénon and the Traditionalist School’, pp. 330-58 in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. A. Faivre and J. Needleman (NY, Crossroad, 1992), presupposes prior knowledge of the authors in question and is disappointingly thin, with an even more inadequate bibliography. Interested readers would do better to turn directly to the many available writings by the authors in question.

into the details of that history, one can say that the direct ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî, in almost all those cases, were inseparable from the wider role of the Shaykh’s thought and teachings in recent North African and Arab Sufi traditions; that the majority of contemporary scholars actively translating Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings into English and French have continued to be directly or indirectly influenced by those same Sufi traditions; and that the most influential and prolific contemporary popularisers and public exponents of those ideas in English (especially Huston Smith and S. H. Nasr) have largely emerged from that same context.

However, when we turn to the wider influences of this ‘school’, beyond the translation and direct study of Ibn ‘Arabî, what immediately stands out is the profound effect of the abundant writings of F. Schuon in applying the central ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî to *articulating* (but in the long run also deeply shaping) an understanding of the spiritual dimensions of religious life appealing profoundly to several generations of philosophers and theologians seeking to develop a comprehensive, non-reductive ‘philosophy of religions’ enabling mutual understanding and active co-operation between the followers of different religious traditions and the increasing number of citizens who do not consciously identify exclusively with any particular historical tradition.²² Because of the peculiar vagaries of academic opinion and respectability, this wide-ranging influence is rarely mentioned publicly (unlike that of the scholars mentioned in the following section), but is to be found virtually everywhere.²³ (Of course this contemporary process closely mirrors the equally pervasive way Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in this domain were largely developed in the past by those seeking to explain, justify and support the creativity and diversity of forms of spiritual life *within* the wider Islamic tradition.²⁴) In the generations following

²²The prominence of the truly ecumenical interest in this dimension of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought in the English-speaking democracies—like the parallel post-WW II growth in university departments of ‘religious studies’ unaffiliated with particular religious denominations—reflects not only the political and social diversities of those cultures (which are arguably no greater than in many other countries), but also the peculiarly limited political and historical weight of any established traditional theologies in these (at least historically) predominantly Protestant cultures.

²³ One rarely encounters academic specialists in the spiritual dimensions of religious studies who have not in fact read several of the works of Schuon. (The peculiar processes of academic ‘canonisation’ by which a writer like M. Eliade, for example, is considered academically ‘respectable’—while, for example, a J. Campbell is not—are familiar to specialists in these fields.)

²⁴ See notes 2, 3 and 9 above and the important new contributions to be published in the Proceedings of the Kyoto Conference concerning the spread of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas (often through creative poets like Jâmî and al-Fansûrî) into China and Southeast Asia, as well as Turkey. As the study of

Schuon, the authors and translators historically associated with this application of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in English themselves have come from and write for readers from every major religious tradition, not just Sufism or traditional Islam. In fact, what has had the widest influence here—whether among academic specialists or a wider public readership—is not any particular set of ideas that could be identified as a single philosophical or religious ‘school,’ so much as a broader shared focus on those spiritual dimensions of religious life *common* to all the revealed religions—an element largely neglected in the reigning sociological and historicist theories of religion—and on the elaboration of an adequate metaphysical framework within which one can understand and appreciate all the observed diversities of religious life and experience. Thus all of those writers foreshadow important facets of that emergent ‘science of spirituality’ to which we return at the end of this essay.

The Metaphysics of Imagination: Corbin, Izutsu and the Eranos School

An intellectually related development in the application of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas—but with a wider, more diverse and less strictly academic audiences—has been the role of these students and interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabî in the elaboration, in both learned and more popular forms, of a persuasive ‘metaphysics of the imagination,’ and in the subsequent adoption of their ideas by artists, writers and others (especially Jungian psychologists) looking to justify their own creative activities and spiritual worldviews. The thought of Corbin (and other Eranos colleagues) and Izutsu was especially relevant in that Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture of the US which had lacked a strong explanation and justification for such creative and therapeutic activities within its own cultural inheritance²⁵; the need for such an explanation and justification was only aggravated by those pervasive Marxist and historicist intellectual currents that dominated Western

Ottoman culture and spiritual life—with its key dimensions shared not only by the many regions of the empire, but also by cognate learned and creative traditions of other faiths—gradually begins to emerge from the atomised nationalisms (of each successor-state and ethnic group) of the last century, one can expect an ongoing series of further discoveries of Ibn ‘Arabî’s wider influences, developing the pioneering work of V. Holbrooke in this domain.

²⁵ This phenomenon is especially visible in the otherwise remarkable (given the advanced and early development of Islamic scholarship there) relative lack of interest in Ibn ‘Arabî in German-language regions of Europe, which is hardly unsurprising in light of the plethora of German mystics, philosophers and artists (most obviously Goethe, with his powerful mirroring of Hafez), from the Middle Ages (Meister Eckhardt or J. Boehme) down to the 19th century, whose ideas and expressions have so powerfully articulated many central insights and concerns of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work.

intellectual discourse during at least the first half of the last century. Here one must note especially the remarkably widespread influence of English translations of Henry Corbin's works on Ibn 'Arabî and related Islamic writers, and of later books and lectures by Toshihiko Izutsu, in both cases through publications (by 'Spring' publishers and the Bollingen translation series at Princeton) closely associated with Eranos conferences and popular proponents of Jungian psychology. In an important new study, S. Wasserstrom has at least suggested some of the seminal and less visible ways Corbin's understanding of Ibn 'Arabî influenced M. Eliade and other foundational figures in the study of religion in the second half of the last century,²⁶ in ways that often paralleled or coincided with the ongoing (but less officially 'academic') influences of Schuon and his colleagues already mentioned above.

Much less studied, but no less influential in the longer run, have been the direct and indirect influences of Ibn 'Arabî's ideas (again largely through the translations and Eranos lectures of Henry Corbin, and again often overlapping with the authors mentioned in the preceding section) on more creative artists and writers. (Again all of these recent Western developments closely parallel the ways Ibn 'Arabî's ideas were earlier used in the Islamic world to justify and interpret the extraordinary creative achievements of the later Islamic humanities, as for example in the long tradition of learned commentaries on the incomparable mystical poetry of Rumi, Ibn al-Fârid, Hafez and others.) In Britain, along similar lines, one could cite the achievements of Keith Critchlow (one of the pioneers in adapting Ibn 'Arabî's ideas to the understanding and practical preservation of many Islamic visual arts) in so effectively supporting and reviving 'traditional' artistic forms and practices, including especially those of Islam; of influential writers like Kathleen Raine (editor of *Temenos*); and of other artists, writers and creators associated with the Beshara Trust. A particularly dramatic illustration of this sort of creative influence is Rafi Zabor's recent (1998) award-winning 'jazz novel', *The Bear Comes Home*, which was inspired by the reading of Ibn 'Arabî and was developed through decades of

²⁶ S. M. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, P. Univ. Press, 1999). Although the author's perspective, sources and organising thesis are avowedly somewhat partial, the book is extremely helpful in suggesting and tracing the many diverse 'channels of influence' and analysing the multiple 'audiences' which are the primary focus of this essay.

careful study of his (translated) writings.²⁷ Similar influences can be traced in the ‘Black Mountain’ school of American poets (Olson, Creeley and others).²⁸ However, the cases of artists and creators actually citing or openly developing these influences of Ibn ‘Arabî and his interpreters are no doubt far fewer than those where the inspiration of their reading and study passes directly into appropriate creative action²⁹—in a way not unlike the multitude of learned Muslim readers of the *Futûhât* who for centuries have applied Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas and insights for their disciples and students in their own sermons, teachings and interpretations, in ways that are often only discernible to those intimately familiar with the Shaykh’s works.

The same hidden influences are particularly evident in the wider domain of what one might call ‘applied spirituality’³⁰—including the actual practice of therapists (of all sorts), psychologists, and spiritual teachers (both within and outside traditional religious denominations)—where Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings and teachings help provide a much-needed inspiration for the creative tasks of spiritual communication and pedagogy facing those seeking to develop the modern-day equivalents of the Islamic humanities, that complex of vitally inspired spiritual poetry, music, and new ritual and social institutions (including what we now call ‘Sufism’ and much more) which shaped Islamic cultures and civilisation in the centuries following Ibn ‘Arabî’s death. Today those individuals in the West who read, seek out, and then apply in their own traditions and religious contexts the practical spiritual lessons contained in Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings come from every religious background, and use all the contemporary artistic,

²⁷ NY/London, W.W. Norton, 1998; winner of the Pen-Faulkner award. Apart from the epigraph of two short unidentified phrases from Ibn ‘Arabî, there would be no way for most readers even to suspect the pervasive inspiring and organising influence of Ibn ‘Arabî on this work, were it not for the author’s own lengthy and fascinating explanation of Ibn ‘Arabî’s relation to the genesis and form of the work at the Ibn ‘Arabi Society international Symposium held at U. C. Berkeley in November 1998.

²⁸ These references are thanks to the poets M. Bylebyl and P.L. Wilson..

²⁹ The central Qur’anic term is of course ‘*sâlihât*’, the active expression of true faith through what is ‘spiritually appropriate and fitting’ at every instant.

³⁰ Fittingly enough, during the Kyoto Conference at which this paper was originally delivered, my host for a brief visit near Tokyo—an old friend and former student—was working as the Japanese translator for a seminar given by a noted creative figure in transpersonal psychology (and active Sufi teacher from a Jerrahi-Khalveti background) who was openly applying ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî and related Sufis in the practical context of that discipline. This friend’s discussion of the many problems of ‘translating’ those Sufi principles and teachings, in their native Californian form, to an audience of psychologists practising in Tokyo, vividly illustrated the many challenges and dimensions of communication summarised above.

practical, devotional and creative equivalents of the classical Islamic humanities. Because those modern-day creators are motivated by their own spiritual, artistic and political needs, they are equally inspired to translate his ideas into the ‘appropriate means’ for their own situation and field of action: normally that means working with audiences and seekers from Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Buddhist, as well as Muslim backgrounds, using the artistic and social forms available in this contemporary culture. To take only one of the most obvious and widely influential examples, one could cite any number of recent feature films which are extraordinarily effective translations of Ibn ‘Arabî central ideas and their common ground of ‘esoteric’ Sufi spiritual teachings into that extraordinarily effective medium for popular spiritual teaching: *Wings of Desire*, *Field of Dreams*, *Afterlife*³¹, *The Colour of Paradise (rang-i Khodâ)*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *The Fisher King*, and so many others.

*Other ‘Sufi’ Teachers and Influences:*³²

If we approach Ibn ‘Arabî’s influence in the West from the perspective of the study of religions, rather than the history of texts and translations, then the first thing we discover—as everywhere when we examine the spread of Sufism—is the key catalytic role of living guides and the small groups initially connected with them,³³ both in encouraging the first translators of Ibn ‘Arabî and in providing the initial audience and readership for those translations and studies of his work. As in the case of the first group discussed above (Guenon, Schuon, etc.), those

³¹ In the original Japanese, *wandarafu raifu* (echoing the F. Capra classic).

³² The best broad introduction to the basic spectrum of Sufi movements in the U.S.—simply as a kind of preliminary ‘catalogue’ and ‘direction-finder’, rather than a full-length description or analysis of any of the particular groups discussed—is probably to be found in two pioneering articles by Marcia Hermansen, ‘Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements,’ in *Muslim World*, 90 (2000), pp. 158-197; and her earlier ‘In the Garden of American Sufi Movements: Hybrids and Perennials’, in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. P. Clarke (London, Luzac, 1997), pp. 155-178. Nothing remotely equivalent exists as yet for the different countries of Western Europe (although many of the groups listed by Hermansen are also active in different countries there), and the diversity and multiplicity of movements and expressions, throughout the European community as a whole, is certainly as great as in the North American context.

³³ I am not personally familiar enough with earliest representatives of this type of Sufi activity in the West, Gurdjieff and H. Inayat Khan, to judge any direct or explicit influences of Ibn ‘Arabî in their work: certainly there are key teachings and distinctive practical approaches of both (or of their later disciples and interpreters) which do reflect themes of Shaykh’s thought widespread in the Sufi traditions (of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and S. Asia, respectively) from which they drew the teachings they then creatively communicated to Western audiences.

pioneering spiritual teachers, themselves coming from the most diverse regions of the Islamic world, have provided, along with their disciples and students, the essential seed-beds for a wider ‘transplanting’ of the Shaykh's influence into non-Islamic settings. And when one looks more closely at the lives of the translators, publishers, and popularisers of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas (anywhere in the West, not only in English speaking countries), one almost always discovers the essential catalytic role of Sufi teachers (or occasionally other Muslim scholars) in educating and motivating the translators and initial audiences for Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought. What is most fascinating about this ‘secret history’ is that—like the initial, creative phase of so many earlier religious movements—it has typically been a private, historically almost invisible process, requiring a detailed autobiographical knowledge of each individual actor and his or her personal history, a process in which the awareness of that necessarily individual dimension of spiritual communication and ‘reception’ tends to disappear from recorded history after each generation. One of the most striking aspects of this history is the way in which the transmission of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought into the English-speaking world, in the second half of the past century, has largely continued to reflect the full range of his earlier influences in every region of the Islamic world, through the key role of teachers from former Ottoman realms (primarily Turkey), South Asia (India and Sri Lanka), and Iran who have passed on to their students, in equally influential ways, something of the central cultural and spiritual roles the figure of the ‘Shaykh al-Akbar’ had taken on in those diverse regions.³⁴

Each of these stories would require a long book simply to recount the most basic facts.³⁵ But what is shared by those spiritual teachers and groups in which the influence of Ibn ‘Arabî is

³⁴ The categorisation by ostensible ‘tariqa’ affiliation adopted in the articles cited in n. 32, while of limited explanatory or descriptive utility, does have the additional virtue of highlighting this important aspect in the ‘translation’ of Sufi movements more generally (not just Ibn ‘Arabî) into new Western contexts, since these vast regional and cultural differences of origin are typically ‘invisible’ or at least quite unfamiliar to non-Muslim audiences in the new countries of ‘adoption’.

³⁵ One such study under preparation is the doctoral dissertation currently being developed by I. Jeffrey at Exeter, which focuses only on the activities of the ‘Beshara School’ and its publications in the UK, over a period of little more than three decades. One quickly discovers that even the accurate generally ‘external’ description of a relatively limited spiritual group is in itself a daunting task, which can become almost limitless as soon as one embarks upon the sort of phenomenology of religious life and experience which is necessary for the serious understanding of any such group and its eventual ‘influences’ and inspirations. The article by M. Hermansen (n. 32 above) mentions several other

most direct and explicit is a *common*, quite visible, factor which clearly marks them all off from the many other explicitly ‘Sufi’ tariqas which have simply attempted to ‘export’ unchanged local forms of Islamic practice to new Western settings: i.e., an explicit common intention to communicate the *spiritual universality* of Qur’anic teaching in ways appropriately adapted—which necessarily means creatively, even if protestations of ‘orthodoxy’ are sometimes required—to the distinctive circumstances of seekers in the contemporary world, relatively few of them ‘Muslim’ in terms of their own immediate cultural heritage. In this respect, some of the most visible and active influences in supporting and communicating the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî have come—not entirely surprisingly—from Sufi traditions deeply rooted in the spiritually cosmopolitan, diverse and sophisticated world of the Ottoman empire. Thus the Beshara School, founded by the profoundly Ottoman figure of Bulent Rauf, has for several decades pioneered in the practical teaching of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings to a wide international audience drawn from all walks of life. Equally significantly, its more academic offshoot, the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, through its *Journal*, library and annual symposia that bring together scholars and translators from all over the world, has succeeded in creating a remarkable global network of editors, translators, and interpreters of the Shaykh’s works which is increasingly effective and influential not only in English-speaking countries and among academic specialists, but also in Muslim countries where intellectuals earlier in the past century had tended to reject the aspects of Islam associated with Ibn ‘Arabî. Under the initial impetus of the charismatic Sheikh Muzaffer, the American branches of another originally Ottoman order (the Khalwati-Jerrahi tariqa) have also been extremely active in creating the vehicles needed for publishing, translating and disseminating Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings and ideas.³⁶

Reflecting the wide-ranging influences of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas in South Asian Islam (most beautifully symbolised in Ibn ‘Arabî’s detailed inspiration for the architectonic form of the Taj

pioneering descriptive studies of this type, though none of those are so directly and profoundly linked to Ibn ‘Arabî as the Beshara group.

³⁶ This is evident both in the editions and translations undertaken by Pir Publications (related to one New York branch of that order), as well as the translations and commentaries (not always identified as such!) of several works by Ibn ‘Arabî translated by T. Bayrak and R.T. Harris, from the other regional branch of the same tariqa. On the West coast, the psychologists R. Frager and J. Fadiman (from yet another branch of the same order) have published a number of more creative books relating ideas of Ibn ‘Arabî and other related Sufis to the practice of psychology, counselling and other forms of therapy, as well as the popular anthology *Essential Sufism* (NY, Harper Collins, 1997).

Mahal)³⁷ other pioneering teachers originally from Muslim South Asia—Hazrat Inayat Khan (Chishti musician, teacher and founder of the Sufi order in the West), his son Pir Vilayat Khan, the Sri Lankan Sufi teacher Bhawa Mohyieddin, or Meher Baba—likewise have continued to emphasise and practically apply the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî, as they had been transmitted and transmuted in the multi-religious Indian context, in their formation and direction of their American and European disciples, in ways that have subsequently been creatively adapted to the practical tasks of medicine and healing, psychology, and spiritual guidance, as well as more creative artistic endeavours.³⁸

And finally, the central role of Ibn ‘Arabî in so much of later Iranian thought (both Shiite and Sunni), poetry and the Islamic arts has been communicated in the West (and especially the English-speaking world) through even more diverse channels: the publications and seminars sponsored by the Ni‘matullahi Sufi order and other originally Iranian spiritual groups; the above-mentioned works of Henry Corbin, S.H. Nasr, and Toshihiko Izutsu (all the direct fruit of their long-term residence, study and scholarly contacts in Iran); and more recently through the ongoing translations, interpretive studies and academic courses undertaken by a number of more recent scholars—Asians, Europeans and Americans—who had studied both with those older scholars and with more traditional representatives of Islamic spirituality in Iran. And again, within each of the recent broader Sufi movements just cited, the spectrum of immediate ‘influences’ of Ibn ‘Arabî’s thought would cover at least thousands of individual cases, ranging

³⁷ See the fascinating study by W. Begley, ‘The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of Its Symbolic Meaning,’ in *The Art Bulletin*, LXI:1 (March 1979). Begley’s study is another extraordinary example of fundamental, undeniably direct influences by Ibn ‘Arabî (in this case the architect’s books and notes directly based on the eschatological/cosmological chapter 371 of the ‘Meccan Illuminations’) which would have been absolutely ‘invisible’ were it not for a particular ‘chance’ discovery of that key historical link.

³⁸ In addition to the helpful description of the various offshoots of Hazrat Inayat Khan’s legacy in the article cited at n. 32 above, see above all the fascinating documentation contained in the many contributions to *A Pearl in Wine: Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan*, ed. Z.I. Khan (NY, Omega, 2001). This new book is important not only for its invaluable detailed historical and background studies (which are virtually non-existent even for fairly recent Sufi figures in so many cases), but also for its more autobiographical descriptions in the concluding section, which again provide the indispensable ‘spiritual phenomenology’ which—taken together—is the actual reality on which any collective activity and description actually depends. The ‘case studies’ detailed there illustrate how much the ‘fantastic’ and extraordinary tales and experiences (of dreams, illuminations, ‘calls’, spiritual ‘coincidences’, ‘miracles’ and the like) scattered throughout Ibn ‘Arabî’s *Futûhât*, in particular, continue to be lived and experienced in contemporary contexts in very similar forms and expressions.

from the spectacularly public and visible (such as the best-selling Rumi translations of Robert Bly and Coleman Barks) to the no less important level of each such individual's spiritual growth and active contributions to their wider community. In each of those instances, the profusion and creative diversity of reactions powerfully defies the historian's inherited vocabulary and conceptual baggage of 'influences', 'traditions', 'communities', 'teachers' and the like. For example, some of the most visible and effective 'influences' of Ibn 'Arabi in the U.S., by each of the channels of communication above, have been on individuals who have gone on to be particularly active in various 'Jewish renewal' movements.³⁹ But while those phenomena and the deeper reasons for that particular influence might seem quite 'obvious' to religious specialists (at least those living and working in the U.S.), they would no doubt require more a extensive explanation for those coming from more distant cultural contexts .

In conclusion, therefore, it may be helpful to draw a few more explicit connections between the contemporary phenomena and potential case-studies we have just mentioned and the broader issues of 'communication' and 'influence' outlined at the beginning of this essay. The focus of the field of academic religious studies (and of Islamic studies with it) has recently been turning toward the more publicly 'interesting' (and intellectually apparently less demanding) study of contemporary religious phenomena, but all too often such studies have betrayed the unfortunate unconscious importation of stereotypes and other misplaced assumptions which can quickly lead to profound and far-reaching misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the phenomena in question. For that reason, a few further 'contextual' explanations (and heuristic suggestions) may be in order. First, in almost all of the cases we have mentioned above, the 'communicators' in question have *not* been trying to use Ibn 'Arabi and his ideas primarily in order to 'convert' people either to Islam or to any particular Sufi order or other social grouping. Whether we are referring to academics, artists, or activists, psychologists and other innovators, any such suggestion (or assumption) would completely misrepresent the intentions of these communicators and their audiences alike. Secondly, if one wants to explore in an accurate and reliable fashion the actual spectrum of influences of the writings, music, therapeutic methods, institutions and the like created by those connected with any of the broader movements

³⁹ Of course there are many more obvious and more public examples, in that general context, of an even broader range of various Buddhist 'influences'; but it is certainly not hard to see why there would

mentioned above, it would be necessary to begin (and constantly to remain) on the plane of the *actual spiritual autobiographies of the different individuals* so influenced. (In other words, ‘sociological’, quantitative approaches and assumptions are normally applied in these domains only by researchers who haven’t seriously thought about what they’re actually assuming.) Finally, for most of the effective communicators mentioned above, questions about what is or is not ‘Muslim’ (or ‘Buddhist’, etc., whatever such terms might mean) in these particular contexts—whether we are speaking of communicator, audience, or the cultural symbols through which communication is possible—are not (indeed practically cannot) be at the centre of their practical efforts at communication, which have to remain focused on their *real spiritual effects and influences* on their given audience, within its given cultural milieu, if their efforts are to have any lasting fruits. Indeed, as we suggest in conclusion, the wider parameters of spiritual communication in the modern world may be shifting in ways that open up new possibilities of communication and creative ‘influence’ that either transcend or practically replace earlier forms, norms and assumptions in these fields.

Translating the ‘Meccan Illuminations’: Toward a ‘New Science’ of Spirituality?

So where does this brief sketch of a history leave us, particularly outside the ‘Islamic world’?⁴⁰ If we can project forward from past historical experience, there are at least two domains in which the appeal and development of Ibn ‘Arabî’s heritage beyond the Islamic world is likely to continue to grow in coming decades. In both those cases (as in the Islamic past), that wider potential interest in his work is likely to arise not directly from the study of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings themselves, but rather from compelling historical situations where—as in the anecdote with which we opened this essay—the unavoidable need for ‘something like’ the Shaykh’s guiding ideas and conceptions will become increasingly apparent to people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. The first domain has to do with Ibn ‘Arabî’s profoundly rooted

be more reticence today about admitting ‘Islamic’ influences in such situations.

⁴⁰ The analysis of the growing renewal of interest in Ibn ‘Arabî in all parts of the contemporary Islamic world, which we have partially undertaken elsewhere (see our articles in note 2 above), would of course take us in very different directions. However, those distinctive directions, differing so radically from one ‘Muslim’ country and region to another, again illustrate the importance of close attention to the particular contexts and ‘audiences’ in question.

explanation of the inevitability and essential good which is embodied and expressed in the *diversity* of human understandings and expressions of our spiritual nature (including, but by no means limited to, the diversities of what different cultures arbitrarily call ‘religious’ life and activity). The ultimate fruit—and practical challenge—of Ibn ‘Arabî’s insight here is a *true mutual understanding* which goes far beyond what we ordinarily think of as tolerance, as a kind of grudging acceptance of the political necessity of the ‘other’. That ongoing process of genuine mutual understanding itself is always an essential human task, a ‘work in progress’ which is very hard for anyone to realise—and which is scarcely emphasised in the most public representatives of any of the monotheistic religions—but which lies at the practical and metaphysical centre of Ibn ‘Arabî’s worldview. It should be clear enough, without any detailed explanation, how ongoing world-historical developments will increasingly oblige people of *every* religious background at least to contemplate what Ibn ‘Arabî has to teach us all in this regard.

The second domain in which Ibn ‘Arabî’s ideas are likely to have an increasing appeal is in some ways simply a wider practical extension of the point we have just made. The unprecedented global technological and economic transformations in the human situation through which we are living, and their still largely unpredictable cultural and political consequences, have so far had as their universal consequences (1) a severing of essential relations with the natural world and natural orders which were presupposed in the ritual and symbolism of every traditional religion; (2) a world-wide ‘homogenisation’ and reduction of the traditionally rich and diverse local forms of social and cultural life (including ‘religion’); and (3) a strong corresponding political and ideological tendency to reduce the reality of human beings to a relatively narrow set of publicly visible ‘social’ and ‘ethical’ needs—whether that tendency is expressed in overt forms of totalitarianism or in more subtle forms of socio-economic conditioning. Ibn ‘Arabî’s understanding of human beings and their place in the universe (along with any number of other wisdom traditions, to be sure) would suggest that each of those three recent global tendencies cannot ultimately be sustained, and that theomorphic beings will inevitably resist, revolt and creatively move beyond those recent destructive historical developments in many different ways. To the extent that such creative reactions do develop, growing numbers of people (and by no means only Muslims) are likely to continue to find inspiration and justification for their intuitions—and for their personal creative revelations—in

what Ibn ‘Arabî has to teach about the spiritual necessity and complementarity of the invisible spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of human being.

If Ibn ‘Arabî’s inspirations in both these areas are to become more widely accessible, one indispensable practical condition for that is the useful translation (with the necessary explanations and contextual matter) of all or most of his ‘Meccan Illuminations’ (*al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*).⁴¹ As already noted above, it is a curious fact that probably the dominant strands of his influence up to now, whether in the Islamic world or more recently in the West, have concerned his much shorter (though equally challenging) ‘*Bezels of Wisdom*’ (*Fusûs al-Hikam*)—along with the vast commentary literature, largely philosophic in nature, which rapidly grew up around that work. The *Futûhât*, as more and more students are beginning to understand, is something unique and very different: one might say that it offers a ‘*phenomenology* of spiritual life’ so comprehensive, detailed and subtle in its depiction of the actual laws and regularities of spiritual experience that nothing significant has escaped its purview. Certainly its contents provide a unique and powerful argument for Ibn ‘Arabî’s conception of the real universality and all-inclusiveness of the ‘Muhammadan Reality’—a key symbolic expression which unfortunately is too often misunderstood (whether in English or Arabic) to mean the exact opposite of what Ibn ‘Arabî actually intended. It is hard to convey the excitement and sense of constant discovery that always accompanies the exploration and unfolding of this immense work: without exaggeration, it is surely the equivalent in this domain of spirituality of what the ‘New World’ must have seemed to its first explorers half a millennium ago. As with the truly timeless creations (Shakespeare, Plato and their like), one comes back to the *Futûhât* each time wondering why one had been spending time on anything else. Although it would be foolhardy to try to predict the wider impact of its gradual unveiling, certainly that discovery process will change the ideas of anyone who still believes that Ibn ‘Arabî’s intentions can be summarised or reduced to a sort of intellectual ‘system’, to any unambiguous ‘doctrine’ or a single rigid set of theological teachings or public beliefs.

⁴¹ See further discussion of this theme in our long new ‘Introduction’ to the forthcoming reprint, by Pir Publishers (NY, 2001), of the extensive English translations (by W. Chittick and J. Morris) originally published by Sindbad (Paris, 1989), and the extensive references to other translations included in that essay.

People often describe the prevailing approach of that (itself relatively quite new) ‘science of religions’ which is largely based on ideas derived from Ibn ‘Arabî as a kind of ‘*phenomenology*’—that is, an approach to uncovering the laws and regularities underlying ‘religious’ phenomena at different levels or domains of reality: political, social, ritual, symbolic, etc. Having said that, anyone working in the field of religious studies is well aware that there are all sorts of unwritten taboos still in operation—most obviously, in its continued primary focus on earlier (and safely ‘dead’) historical systems and theological doctrines and ‘beliefs’, and in the embarrassed scholarly reluctance to approach a genuinely comprehensive phenomenology of spiritual *experiences* in the way one finds much more clearly set out in either the immense range of popular spiritual literatures or in the closely related literature of fields like psychology, medicine and various forms of therapy. In other words, the ‘folk’ who populate this particular scholarly universe are normally still far removed from that ‘subjective objectivity’ which was so typical of those ‘*qawm*’ (the ‘people of God’) whose experiences and insights are the constant subject and reference-point of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘*Meccan Illuminations*’. As I have recently discussed at greater length in other places,⁴² it is clear to all concerned that there is a growing convergence today, where the phenomenology of spiritual life is concerned, between the historical data and approaches of the academic discipline of religious studies and a wide range of closely related scientific and therapeutic fields. As that convergence continues to unfold, more and more researchers and ‘verifiers’ (*muhaqqiqûn*) will find themselves doing, in our own time, what Ibn ‘Arabî so thoroughly and far-sightedly undertook in his *Futûhât*.

⁴² A number of studies on this theme (especially as it relates to the philosophy of Mulla Sadra and its continuation in the more recent works of Ostad Elahi) are brought together in our volume entitled *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2001).

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“...*Except His Face*”: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Legacy

The aim of this brief survey¹ is to examine the reception and the influences of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work in the past--both in the Islamic world in the seven centuries following his death, and in the West over the past century--in order to discover what that long and eventful history may suggest about the future of his legacy as his works continue to become more widely translated and accessible to much broader audiences in years to come. To anticipate its conclusions, a closer look at what we now know of that history reveals a remarkable continuity in the locus of Ibn ‘Arabi’s appeal and the nature of his primary audiences across all sorts of historical, cultural and religious boundaries. In this respect, the extraordinary breadth and continuity of Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence remains a striking historical mystery, in ways that closely parallel the equally far-reaching and surprisingly lasting influences of such Spanish near-contemporaries as Moses of Leon (the presumed compiler of the Zohar), Averroes and Maimonides. As the citation of such figures suggests, perhaps one of the essential roots of that mystery lies in the way the situation of 12th and 13th-century Spain already prefigured so many of the civilizational and religious conflicts, encounters, and possibilities that are such a predominant feature of global life at the dawn of the 21st century.

¹The beginning of the title alludes to a famous Qur’anic verse (28:88, “...every thing is perishing, except for His/its Face”) which is frequently cited by Ibn ‘Arabi. We would like to thank the organizers of the IV Congreso Internacional sobre Mohyiddin Ibn Al' Arabi held in Murcia, Spain (November 1996), on the general theme of "The Legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi: Thought Without Frontiers," for the original occasion for preparing this paper.

In any event, it is essential to note that there was nothing in the outward, visible aspect of Ibn ‘Arabi’s life and activities, during his own lifetime, that could possibly have suggested the extent and duration of his subsequent influences. He was not the founder of a Sufi tariqa or an outwardly charismatic “leader” surrounded by many influential disciples; nor--despite the important literary qualities of his poetry and other writing--was he an incomparable, world-class poet or mystical storyteller like Rumi, Attar, Hafez or so many other masters of that quintessential Islamic art. Indeed, his own writings were apparently little known at the time of his death, scattered in manuscript copies from the Maghreb to the East of the Islamic world, and composed in an extremely difficult Arabic, destined for a tiny elite of religious scholars and presupposing a rare mastery both of esoteric Sufi traditions and of all the complex religious and cosmological sciences of his time. And finally, his works make no secret of his unambiguously Sunni Muslim allegiances and presuppositions--a constant theological and rhetorical emphasis which makes his widespread later influences among both Shiite scholars and even non-Muslims all the more surprising.

Keeping in mind this apparently quite unpromising historical situation at the time of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own death, there can be little doubt that the extraordinary appeal and spread of his ideas in subsequent generations was due not simply to certain intrinsic features of his own thought, but also to new historical situations and their intellectual and spiritual demands which helped to highlight the relevance of the ideas articulated in his works. If we evoke some of the key figures in that process of transmission and development of his ideas here, it is only to help bring out the three essential dimensions that, taken together, can help to explain the mystery of the perennial appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writing throughout later centuries: These are (a) the relevant unique features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own ideas and their expression; (b) the particular, recurrent historical

situations where their appeal--one might almost say, the “need” for them--was particularly evident; and (c) the corresponding audiences and interpreters who were particularly affected by that need and the appeal of those ideas.

To begin with the most visible, historical dimension of this process, the four centuries following Ibn ‘Arabi’s death were marked above all by the definitive creation of Islam as a truly “world” religion, no longer limited to or defined by the Arabic-speaking lands and social groups with which it could still largely be identified even in Ibn ‘Arabi’s own day. Most obviously, this remarkable historical transformation--which is still relatively unstudied--involved the spread and creative development of new forms of popular piety and devotional life centering on the proliferating Sufi tariqas and especially on popular devotion to the “saints” or *awliya’*, developments which were transmitted throughout the vast Eastern *oikumene* opened up by the Mongol conquests through trade and new forms of poetic and devotional expression (originally in the New-Persian *koine* of that realm). On the political level, the chaos and creative decentralization created by the combined Mongol and Crusader invasions--when the “*dīn al-Islam*,” in the political sense, almost disappeared in the decades immediately following Ibn ‘Arabi’s death--eventually led to the development of the three vast, multi-confessional empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Moguls, along with the even wider spread of Islamic faith, practice and cultural models throughout Central and Southeast Asia and much of Africa. This, then, was the essential historical backdrop to the period of the most creative, multi-faceted appropriation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work and ideas throughout the Eastern Islamic world.

Within this new historical situation (already partially prefigured in the Andalusia of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own youth), we can identify essentially *four different contexts*--and four corresponding audiences and groups of “users”--where Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas and writings found a fertile reception.

(To anticipate our conclusions below, it would seem that today and in the future as well the appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas is likely to continue to be divided among four comparable groups.) In each of these cases, as one might expect, there is an immense gamut of appropriation and adaptation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, ranging from rote citation and outright plagiarism (rarely avowed) to remarkable heights of creativity and subtle inspiration.

(1) To begin with, the broadest range of uses and influences of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work was among those Muslims directly involved in practical spiritual life and guidance--for example, Sufi shaykhs, preachers, jurists, Qur’an commentators from all parts of the Islamic world--who found in his magnum opus, the Futuhat al-Makkiya (“The Meccan Illuminations”), a sort of all-encompassing encyclopedia of Islamic thought, especially in the domain of spiritual practice, and perhaps the most penetrating and profound of all commentaries on the Qur’an and traditions of the Prophet. As the recent researches of Michel Chodkiewicz, Denis Gril, and other younger scholars have shown, teachers and guides from every region and almost every school of Islamic thought quickly recognized the depth and inspiration of Ibn ‘Arabi’s insights and interpretations in this vast work and turned them to practical use in their own domains--generally without acknowledging the often somewhat “suspect” source of their borrowing and without being particularly concerned with the systematic philosophic or theological dimensions of the Shaykh’s ideas. In this domain, the *indirect* influences, through repetition, popularization and simplification, soon came to predominate over the direct use and citation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s stubbornly difficult and challenging writings themselves. (One could compare this process to the equally widespread popularization of Avicenna’s theological and philosophic language throughout later Islamic thought.)

The other three groups attracted to Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings and ideas are considerably easier to isolate, since in each case they tended to focus--at least in their own writings and borrowings--on his highly controversial, later book, the Fusus al-Hikam (“The Bezels of Wisdom”), and on the long series of philosophical commentaries which quickly grew up surrounding that work. In all three of these tendencies, there is a strong *political* dimension to the study and citation of Ibn ‘Arabi, alongside the spiritual and intellectual processes of more creative and philosophic appropriation of his thought.

(2) One tendency, which already finds one of its most distinguished and influential exponents in Ibn ‘Arabi’s disciple and stepson, Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, sought to develop on the basis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings what came to be by far the most elaborate Islamic “philosophy of religion” and religious life, a comprehensive metaphysics which offered an all-encompassing justification and explanation for the observed diversity of religious, philosophic, and spiritual “paths” to God--whether within the multiple sects and schools of later Islamic culture, or in the even wider, multi-confessional context of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mogul empires. (The key “Akbarian” leitmotifs in such writers are such familiar unifying themes as the Unicity of Being, the “Muhammadan Reality” and the “Complete Human Being” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), the degrees of divine Presence, the relations of prophecy and sainthood, and the relations of the One divine Reality to the multiple prophetic Revelations.) Here it is relatively easy to trace the lines of intellectual affiliation and inspiration leading from Qunawi on to the celebrated Persian poet Jami, or to such later philosophic masters as Mulla Sadra (in Safavid Iran), Shah Waliullah (in Mogul India), or Raneri (in Malaysia)--to mention only a few of the most famous and influential figures in this group. If most of these writers were originally concerned with situations of religious conflict and diversity within the broader Muslim community, the extension of their

insights to wider, *inter*-religious situations--as in many of their more recent Western interpreters--requires little more than a shift of emphasis and application.

(3) A second tendency and domain of influence involves the use of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas by creative writers (such as the Persian poets ‘Iraqi and Jami) and religious scholars to provide commentaries and explanations for the aims and presuppositions of the incomparable mystical poets (Rumi, Ibn al-Farid, etc.) whose creations had such a profound effect in shaping the “Islam” of the vast regions and diverse peoples who were entering into the wider predominant Islamic civilization and culture (even if not always formally Muslim themselves) during this period. Here this remarkable adaptation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas (such key themes as the spiritual Ascension, the perpetually renewed Creation, and the perennial, essential links of each soul to Revelation) and earlier Sufi developments came to provide what one might very roughly compare to the multiple intellectual and political functions of artistic and literary “criticism” in the modern West. In particular, it is clear that this articulation and adaptation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s insights often served to provide an indispensable political or ideological “justification” for the activities of Muslim artists and poets as much as a direct creative inspiration in itself. Here again, the widespread modern Western interest--among writers, poets, artists and psychologists--in Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the “creative Imagination” can be understood as another direct adaptation of a familiar tendency in earlier Islamic uses of his writing.

(4) Finally, a third recurrent influence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings was in a vast tradition of polemic writings, extending down to heated political disputes in many parts of the Islamic world even in our own day, where the underlying issues at stake--when historians look at each case more closely--most often turned on the relative influence of groups connected with the growing Sufi orders and their related practices and socio-political demands. This particular theme of

support for the “innovations” and intentions of earlier generations of Sufis, which is certainly implicit throughout Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, took on heightened importance as it became applied to all the new social and religious movements and tendencies of subsequent centuries. In this polemic context, Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings provided an almost ready-made defense not only of the historical Sufi tariqas, but indeed of the diversity and creativity inherent in all spiritual life--a defense that has continued to be necessary (in the Islamic world as elsewhere) against the reductionist attacks and exclusivist claims common to powerful social and political movements and their accompanying ideologies, whether or not explicitly “religious,” in any age. In those controversial contexts, such central features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought as his uncompromising “spiritual realism,” his universality, and his focus on the irreducible centrality of the individual spiritual relationship to God have continued to provide inspiration--and formidable rhetorical and theological ammunition--to those threatened by political, social or theological forms of totalitarian reductionism. (And if those challenges happen to be most evident in some areas of the Islamic world today, even a moment’s reflection should be sufficient to remind us of the perennial temptation and universal attraction of such tendencies, in every religion and area of life.)

As a particularly dramatic illustration of this recurrent dimension of Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence, inherently both political and intellectual, we can mention the long literary tradition of books of philosophic “trials” or “adjudications” (muhakamat), in the centuries following his death, of the competing claims of the rationalist philosophers, traditionalist theologians, and the practical mystics--the competing religious “paths” of *‘aql*, *naql* and *kashf*. The interest of this long literary tradition, which originally grew out of real-life theological disputations in court or *madrashah* settings, lies less in the originality of the ideas expressed than in the particular (and yet

perennial) political and social alternatives, the contrasting religious conceptions of human perfection and the ideal state, which are reflected in these controversies. It should not be surprising if the proponents of the necessity and preeminence of the path of *kashf*, of spiritual illumination and creative inspiration, throughout later Islamic thought, inevitably draw their arguments from the writings and ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi, which they view as clarifying the proper balance and relationship between these three equally indispensable elements of human social, religious and spiritual life. This tradition of theological writing is itself the most overtly political expression of the more philosophic and aesthetic interests in Ibn ‘Arabi’s work discussed above, and many writers who contributed to those more creative elaborations of Ibn ‘Arabi’s influence (e.g., Jami, Mulla Sadra, Shah Waliullah) were also active in these controversies.

In fact, a closer examination of these controversial writings and the typical intellectual “representatives” of the different alternative perspectives at issue (i.e., *aql*, *naql* and *kashf*: rationalism, religious traditionalism, and spiritual “unveiling”) is an excellent way to approach the truly distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s own intellectual and rhetorical approach which can help to explain the mystery of his ongoing appeal and influence. To put it most directly, we could say that Ibn ‘Arabi is inseparably a “religious *and* mystical philosopher” or a “mystic philosopher-theologian”: to leave out any one of those elements would be to misrepresent completely his actual approach and outlook. What that means is already clearer when we contrast his outlook with the radically different approaches of two of his most vehement critics in the line of later controversies we have just mentioned: with the far-sighted, pragmatic rationalism of Ibn Khaldun, or the fiercely consistent “traditionalism” of an Ibn Taymiya. In making that contrast--at least for those familiar with either of those famous Islamic thinkers--it is

immediately apparent that much more is involved here, whether socially, intellectually or spiritually, than the addition of a simple “mysticism” or another “mystical philosophy.”

But the real complexity and distinctive subtlety of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought best emerges when he is compared with such figures as al-Ghazali and (the martyred philosopher-mystic) Suhrawardi--both of them likewise “mystics” and “philosopher-theologians” deeply grounded in Islamic theologian. In this contrast, we can quickly grasp that what is unique in Ibn ‘Arabi, in contrast with al-Ghazali, is the *explicit*, truly universal focus of his metaphysical framework and the *comprehensive* (and again universal) *spiritual realism* which flows from that metaphysical perspective. The appeal to Islamic tradition and the depth of familiarity with that tradition is equally central in both figures, but one could say that Ibn ‘Arabi renders explicit what largely remains implicit in Ghazali’s writing--and therefore becomes accessible and potentially useful to readers of every spiritual tradition, not simply Muslims. With Suhrawardi’s “illuminative wisdom” (*hikmat al-ishraq*), to take the other instructive contrast, the dimension of philosophic universality is at least as strongly emphasized--but in forms of expression and practice which are radically less visibly grounded in *the concrete details of Islamic revelation, tradition and spiritual practice*. The obvious, recurrent danger in this case (with Suhrawardi) is that his teaching can readily become reduced to simply another philosophic system, cut off from the roots of spiritual practice (and their own indispensable historical and social context) which Suhrawardi himself never ceases to stress as the essential precondition for grasping his own approach.

To sum up, what remains absolutely distinctive about Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought and writing--and truly unparalleled within Islamic culture--is his unique and (from his own perspective) indissoluble emphasis on the necessity and ultimate coincidence of true spiritual universality and

the proper apprehension and practical realization of the most concrete details of the “Muhammadan” (i.e., the truly all-inclusive and universal) revelation: one cannot separate either of these dimensions of his thought and writing without radically falsifying his thought and intentions. And if one cannot articulate these two inseparable dimensions of his legacy without immediately raising a certain uneasiness among non-Muslim readers and auditors, that is precisely because we are not at all used to taking seriously what is involved in Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive understanding of “true spiritual universality” and “comprehensiveness.” The deepening realization and understanding of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought necessarily proceeds through an ongoing dialectic, a sort of ascending spiral moving between these two poles (at once practical and intellectual) of all his writing.

* *

Hopefully what has been mentioned above about the four primary dimensions of the reception and transmission of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought in the Islamic world has also been sufficient to suggest the parameters of his influence in Western thought since the first translations of his work at the beginning of this century.²

In conclusion, if we may speak of the future of Ibn ‘Arabi’s legacy, it is only to draw attention to some of the lessons that can legitimately be drawn from that past we have so quickly surveyed here. To begin with those regions of the Islamic world where the ultimate questions of political and social life continue to be posed in terms drawn from Islamic tradition (which is an

²For a general survey of the corresponding aspects of the influence of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought in the West during the past century, see our article on “La Réception d’Ibn al-‘Arabî dans le nouvel monde: voies visibles et voies cachées” (*istiqbâl al-shaykh al-akbar fî al-maghrib al-aqsâ: al-turuq al-zâhir wa-l-bâtin*) to appear (in French and Arabic) in the collective volume of proceedings of the *Mawsimiyât* de

ever-increasing number of states in recent years), it is highly likely that the appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi--and the appeal to his ideas and understandings of Islamic tradition--will continue to follow earlier models, suitably adopted to contemporary circumstances, both in the domains of politics and of what (for lack of a better term) we may call the “aesthetic” dimensions of existence. This is not so much because Ibn ‘Arabi could easily be identified with any particular political or ideological tendency, but rather because there is simply no other Islamic thinker whose thought offers anything like the same combination of an acceptance of creativity and flexibility of interpretation combined with concrete, comprehensive faithfulness to the revealed historical Sources of that tradition. Ideologies and ideologues of whatever stripe, once they begin to question themselves and their true adherence to Islamic tradition, are almost inevitably forced to come to grips with Ibn ‘Arabi. (Khomeini’s revealing letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, with its emphasis on the fundamental role of Ibn ‘Arabi and his Shiite interpreter Mulla Sadra in the understanding of Islam, was an extraordinary witness to this phenomenon, and surely not the last.)

Secondly--and still remaining for the moment within the limits of the traditional “Islamic” world--nothing is more striking in modernist forms of Islamist ideology and rhetoric, as well as in the concrete social lives of Muslims living in the vast cities of impoverished new nation states, than the disappearance of traditional “*adabiyat*,” of the “Islamic humanities,” the elaborate *aesthetic* forms of art, culture and social relations so central in every traditional Islamic culture--and the rhetorical substitution of a highly reductive, ostensibly “ethical” ideology which fails to conceal the new barbarism and raw relations of economic power, inequality and arbitrary rule endemic in such situations. To the extent that this widespread phenomenon--already

familiar in the evolution of fascist and communist responses to similar socio-economic circumstances in Europe and Latin America--eventually leads toward the reconstruction of a more balanced, humanly satisfying way of life that gives full weight to the “invisible,” aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of our human being, Muslims attempting to justify (in political and theological terms) the reality and importance of those aesthetic concerns will inevitably be obliged to turn to the writings and teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi, which are incomparably rich in this regard.

Given the extraordinary extent to which all of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings are inextricably embedded in their Islamic scriptural and cultural matrix, it is difficult to predict the direction of his influence beyond the Islamic world in years to come. One would think, at first glance, that the very attempt to “translate” his ideas and inspirations into another cultural and religious context would, as with so many other philosophers and thinkers, would quickly deteriorate into a vague, eclectic gesture once those ideas become separated from their Islamic roots. However, the remarkable degree and sustained duration of contemporary Western interest in his writings and teachings already suggests that something else, beyond the history of ideas and concepts, may be involved here.

To begin with, on the level of *spiritual practice* and “*practical spirituality*,” as interested seekers and practitioners from many religious backgrounds explore and discover the commonalities of practice and experience underlying less familiar traditions, Ibn ‘Arabi’s works--and more particularly his massive Futuhat--remain a uniquely rich and comprehensive encyclopedia of the accomplishments and approaches of many branches of Islamic tradition. The phenomenal wave of recent translations and studies drawing from the Futuhat suggest that

there is much that can be fruitfully communicated to interested seekers approaching Ibn ‘Arabi from other traditions and religious backgrounds. The exploration of his writings from this perspective of practical spirituality is only in its earliest stages, and it offers rich prospects for spiritual rediscoveries and the sort of true communication and communion that is based on a shared ground of common spiritual experience.

If we can project forward from past historical experience, there are at least two other domains in which the appeal and development of Ibn ‘Arabi’s heritage outside the Islamic world is also likely to grow in coming decades. In both those cases (as in the Islamic past), that potential interest in his work is likely to arise not from the study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings themselves, but rather from historical situations where the “need” for something like the Shaykh’s ideas and conceptions will become increasingly apparent to people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. The first point has to do with Ibn ‘Arabi’s profoundly rooted explanation of the *inevitability* and *essential good* which is embodied and expressed in the *diversity* of human understandings and expressions of our spiritual nature (including, but by no means limited to, the diversities of what we arbitrarily call “religious” life and activity). The ultimate fruit--and practical challenge!--of Ibn ‘Arabi’s insight here is a *true mutual understanding* which goes far beyond what we ordinarily think of as “tolerance.” This is an insight and perspective which is very hard for anyone to actually realize, and which is scarcely emphasized in the most visible representatives of any of the monotheistic religions, but which lies at the practical and metaphysical center of Ibn ‘Arabi’s worldview. It should be clear how world-historical developments will increasingly oblige people of every religious background to at least contemplate what Ibn ‘Arabi has to teach in this regard.

The second domain in which Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas are likely to have an increasing appeal is in some ways a wider practical extension of the point we have just made. The unprecedented global technological transformations in the human situation through which we are living, and their still largely unpredictable cultural and political consequences, have so far had as their universal consequences (a) a severing of essential relations with the natural world and natural orders which were presupposed in the ritual and symbolism of every traditional religion; (b) a worldwide “homogenization” and reduction of the traditionally rich and diverse local forms of social and cultural life; and (c) a strong corresponding political and ideological tendency to reduce the reality of human beings to a relatively narrow set of “social” and “ethical” needs--whether that is expressed in overt forms of totalitarianism or in more subtle forms of socio-economic conditioning. Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of human beings and their place in the universe (along with any number of other wisdom traditions, to be sure) would suggest that each of these three global tendencies cannot ultimately be sustained, and that theomorphic beings will inevitably resist, revolt and creatively move beyond those recent historical developments in one way or another. To the extent that such creative reactions do develop, growing numbers of people (and not only Muslims) are likely to continue to find inspiration and justification for their intuitions--and their personal creative revelations--in what Ibn ‘Arabi has to teach about spiritual necessity and complementarity of these invisible, “aesthetic” dimensions of human being.

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From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities: Popular and Written Contexts

Those who write about Islamic "mysticism" for all but specialized scholarly audiences are usually referring to a small selection of classical Arabic and Persian writings translated into Western languages, or to the handful of traditions of spiritual practice from the Muslim world that have become known even more recently in the West. In that situation the risks of serious misunderstanding, for an uninformed audience, are almost unavoidable, especially where some sort of comparative perspective is assumed. In the hope of helping non-Islamicists to avoid some of those common pitfalls, this essay is devoted to outlining some of the most basic features of the actual contexts of teaching and devotion within which those Islamic texts most often characterized as "mystical" were originally written and studied.

I. Introduction: the Concept of *Walâya*

Perhaps the most fundamental dimension of this problem is beautifully summarized in the following hadîth qudsî, one of the most frequently cited of those extra-Qur'anic "divine sayings":

(God said:) "For Me, the most blessed of My friends¹ is the person of faith

¹awliyâ'î (singular walî): i.e., those who are "close to" God, probably alluding to the famous Qur'anic verses 10:62-64: "...the friends of God, they have no fear and they do not grieve...theirs is the Good News in this lower life and in the next (life)...that is the Tremendous Attainment".. The same Arabic term--which also carries significant connotations of "protector", "guardian" and even "governor"--also appears as one of the more frequent Names of God (at 2:257; 3:68; 45:19; etc.). In most branches of Shiite thought it is one of the many Qur'anic terms taken as references to the spiritual function of the Imams, while in later Sufism--most elaborately in the thought of Ibn cArabî and his successors--the term is usually understood to refer to the

who is unburdened (by possessions), who takes pleasure in prayer, who carries out well his devotion to his Lord and eagerly serves Him in secret. He is concealed among the people; no one points him out. His sustenance is barely sufficient, and he is content with that.... His death comes quickly, there are few mourners, and his estate is small."²

Now the living presence of the "Friend of God" or walî (pl. awliyâ'), in one manifestation or another--whether it be Muhammad and his Family or certain Companions, any of the earlier prophets, the Shiite Imams, or the many pious Muslims who have come to be recognized posthumously as "saints"--has for centuries been a central focus of popular religious and devotional life in much of the Islamic world.³ But the true walî, as this hadîth stresses, is most often publicly "invisible" in this life, outwardly indistinguishable from many other normally

particular spiritual state of proximity to God (walâya) shared by the divine Messengers, prophets (anbiyâ') and saints, besides the different spiritual functions that distinguish each of those members of the spiritual hierarchy. See the more complete discussion in M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabî*, especially chapt. 1.

In the influential poetic classics of the later Islamic humanities, this complex of Arabic terms is conveyed above all by the recurrent, intentionally ambiguous references to the "Beloved" or "Friend" (Persian Yâr or Dûst, and their equivalents in Turkish, Urdu, Malay, etc.). There this relationship of walâya/wilâya becomes the central metaphor for the divine-human relationship and the theophanic nature of all nature and experience.

The intimately related theme of the spiritual virtues of poverty and humility stressed in this same divine saying is likewise reflected in many other hadîth, which together help explain the frequency of terms like faqîr and darvîsh (Arabic and Persian for "poor person", "beggar", etc.) to refer to the saints and their followers in later Islamic mysticism.

²This hadîth is included, with minor variations, in the canonical collections of Tirmidhî, Ibn Mâja, and Ibn Hanbal. See the full text and notes in W.A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 120-121.

³Throughout this paper it should be kept in mind that the English word "saint" (and its equivalents in other Christian contexts) is quite inadequate to convey either the centrality or the fluidity of the implicit associations and spiritual connections which are typically perceived in Islamic devotional contexts--e.g., in prayers at a specific shrine, or within a given Sufî path--between the divine al-Walî (Yâr, Dûst, etc.) and the wide spectrum of human and spiritual exemplars or "theophanies" (mazâhir) who are typically available to each individual Muslim or local community. And even within Islamic religious scholarship, the learned theological explanations of these central popular devotional practices (e.g., in terms of functions like wasîla, shifâ'a, wilâya, spiritual "hierarchies," and the like) usually depend on drawing firm distinctions

devout Muslim men and women. And even after death, for those awliyâ' whose mission of sanctity or "proximity" to God (walâya) has become more widely recognized, the mysterious reality of their ongoing influence likewise remains invisible to most people, revealing itself directly only at the appropriate moments in individual, highly personalized means of contact: through dreams, visions, intuitions and spiritual acts of Grace (karamât) or special blessings that only appear to "those with the eyes to see."

Thus this famous hadîth suggests two basic considerations that should be kept in mind whenever one encounters the written works usually associated with Islamic "mysticism". The first point is that with rare exceptions such texts were not originally meant to be studied by themselves. Usually they were understood, by their author and audience alike, to be only secondary or accessory means to their aim (and often their source): the awliyâ'--taken in the broadest sense, including the prophets and Imams--and the gradual realization of that spiritual condition of walâya, or "closeness to God", embodied in such individuals.⁴ The second, closely related point is that such "mystical" writings in their original context--and especially those works written in languages other than classical Arabic--were often quite inseparable from the whole range of "popular" religion, from the faith so diversely lived and practiced by the mass of the Muslim population (in contrast to the versions represented by the Arabic traditional religious sciences and the claims of their learned urban male interpreters). In fact in many regions of the

and conceptual boundaries that scarcely reflect the intimate spiritual realities of actual prayer and devotional life.

⁴While the different actual roles of various types of mystical writings and their interplay with oral traditions and teaching in pre-modern contexts are discussed in more detail below, we should add that many of the same points are also relevant to the transmission of many other (non-"mystical") forms of Islamic tradition and learning, including especially the oral transmission of hadîth, which continued for centuries beyond the more limited domain of their usage within the narrower sphere of Islamic law (fiqh). Perhaps the most visible and significant illustration of this point--and one by no means unique to the Islamic context-- is the fact that many of the "founders" and eponyms of major Sufi tariqas were either relatively anonymous (at least in terms of contemporary written historical documentation), nearly illiterate, or authors of relatively few "mystical" texts if we compare them with the often prolific writers among later members of those same orders. The same relative anonymity often holds true as well for those innumerable local saints (and in Shiite settings, relatives of the Imams) whose shrines are the objects of pilgrimage and popular devotions throughout the Islamic world: the manifestations of their walâya are not sought in writing, and the "proofs" of their presence are not handed down in books.

Muslim world that faith was originally spread and inculcated almost entirely by such popular "mystical" writings and their even more widespread oral equivalents, or rather above all by the saints and other religious teachers who conveyed (and often created) both that literature and the music and other forms of spiritual practice that typically accompanied it.

If one keeps both those essential points in mind, it is easy to understand the practical and historical reasons behind the profusion of personalities and spiritual methods, symbols, practices, and beliefs that one discovers already in the lives of the classical exemplars of Islamic mysticism in Baghdad and Khorasan in the 3rd century (A.H.). But those same considerations also help us to appreciate the deep sense of disillusionment and failure, of something gone profoundly wrong, whenever the spiritual dimension of Islam has come to be identified with any particular, exclusive set of such historical forms.⁵ That recurrent realization was summed up in the frequently echoed response of the Khurasani mystic al-Qûshanjî (d. 348/959) to a disciple's naive question "What is Sufism (*tasawwuf*)?":

"(Today it's) a name without reality; but it used to be a reality without a name."⁶

Whether name or reality, the unavoidable problem for students of religion is that there is still so little accessible literature that one can rely on to provide either of these essential contexts for understanding the wider religious functions and meaning of the many written--and the far more extensive unwritten--forms and expressions of Islamic mysticism.

⁵A typical sign of this phenomenon recurring in different contexts throughout Islamic history is the characteristic progressive socio-linguistic devaluation of technical terms once used to refer to "mystics" as soon as the practices or institutions connected with those forms of spirituality have become popularly routinized and "corrupted" (from the perspective of different elites). To take only a few illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere at very different periods, there is the early succession from ʿâbid to zâhid to ʿârif; the eventually even more widespread pejorative connotations of words like darvîsh, faqîr and sûfî (often coexisting with other positive meanings); and the post-Safavid Shiite scholarly opposition of terms like *tasawwuf* (or *mutasawwifa*)--in either case associated with Sunni or "folk", rural religious movements--to ʿirfân (true "gnosis).

⁶The dictum is repeated in two of the most famous Persian works on Sufism, Hujwîrî's (d. ca. 465/1071) *Kashf al-Mahjûb* (tr. R.A. Nicholson, London, 1911, p. 44, where the name is given as *Fûshanjî*), and Jâmî's (d. 1492) biographical dictionary, *Nafahât al-'Uns* (ed. M. Tawhîdîpûr, Tehran, 1336 h.s./1957, pp. 255-56), apparently based on a more direct account in the earlier Arabic *Tabaqât* of Sulamî (d. 412/1021).

II. The Qur'an and the Islamic Humanities

Interestingly enough, there is a fairly simple experiment that quickly reveals both the origins of the many genres of Islamic "mystical" literature and the key to the contexts within which they originally functioned. If one simply makes a serious effort to communicate in English (or in any other non-Islamic language) something of the inner meanings and deeper message of the Arabic Qur'ân⁷ to a cross-section of a given community--from children to adults, both women and men, with all their practical occupations, personal concerns, educational backgrounds, and spiritual and intellectual aptitudes--one quickly finds oneself obliged to recreate, in today's idiom, virtually the full spectrum of what is usually called Islamic "mystical" literature, both theoretical and practical. Hence the typologies of form and audience outlined in the following sections are clearly determined by the necessary interplay between (a) particular topics or teachings drawn (directly or indirectly) from the Qur'ân; (b) the attitudes, expectations and capabilities of each particular audience; and (c) the individual teacher's own perceptiveness and creative ability--using words, music, drama, and all the other instruments of human communication--to evoke in each member of their audience the indispensable immediate awareness of those ever-renewed theophanies "in the world and in their souls"⁸ which will actually bring that spiritual message alive.

⁷To date, even the best English "translations" of the Qur'ân bear roughly the same relation to the recited Arabic original as program notes to the actual performance of a classical symphony. The inadequacies of those efforts--which reflect the difficulties of the challenge, more than the talents of the translators--only highlight the extraordinary creativity and originality (and the frequently Qur'ânic inspiration) of the great masters of the poetic and musical traditions of the Islamic humanities discussed below.

Similarly, anyone performing this experiment in a Western language relatively untouched by Islamic culture will quickly discover the profound ways in which traditionally Islamic languages from the most diverse linguistic families (e.g., Persian, Turkish, Swahili, or Malay) have in fact become thoroughly permeated in their vocabulary and wider conceptual and symbolic universes by language and symbols drawn from the Qur'ân and hadîth most often mediated through the lasting creative influences of the oral and written "Islamic humanities" in each of those areas.

⁸A reference to the famous verses at 41:53, "We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls" (or "within themselves"), perhaps the most frequently cited Qur'ânic proof-text for the perennial human manifestations of the divine walâya.

Now if we may borrow the term "Islamic humanities" to describe the whole socially embedded and historically changing matrix of cultural forms--institutions, epics, myths and folktales, rituals, poetry, music, codes of right behavior (*adab*) and implicit values and expectations--through which that transmission of spiritual teaching actually takes place within each Muslim family or local social group,⁹ Unfortunately, surveys or accounts of Islamic religion for non-specialist audiences rarely begin to convey the fundamental sociological importance and historical preponderance of families (and at higher social levels, of small, rapidly shifting and largely informal associations of individuals, rarely organized as lasting "sects" or "congregations") or of very small-scale, informal local groupings (urban quarter, village, local tribe) as the primary locations for the practice and transmission of "Islamic" teachings throughout history, at least until the radically new intervention of (to us) more familiar forms of nation-state and media-propagated mass religious ideologies, based on Western models, in the latter part of this century. As a result the actual social and cultural realities and extraordinary diversity of the religious lives of Muslims, in virtually any period or locality, are rarely discernible behind the textbook fictions of "Islamic" clergies, sects, theologies, laws, rituals, beliefs, orders, orthodoxies and orthopraxies, laities, and so on fabricated to fit their audiences' expectations and paradigms of "religion" and "religious" institutions. (One measure of Max Weber's intelligence and awareness of the historically grounded roots of his own "ideal-types" was his prudent reluctance to extend them inappropriately into the alien fields of Islamic religion and society.) then it is clear that the religious literatures traditionally associated with Islamic "mysticism" have indeed played a central (although by no means exclusive) role in that process of spiritual education for the majority of Muslims living in any period.⁹ And it is equally clear

⁹As discussed in more detail below, it is essential to keep in mind that the religiously relevant "literatures", in almost any Islamic context--and particularly for the women, villagers, peasants and tribespeople who have constituted the vast majority of Muslims in the world until this century--have been predominantly oral and vernacular, in creative, locally meaningful cultural forms that can seldom be understood simply as "diluted" versions of any of the learned Arabic sciences. The fundamental, ongoing religious importance of the awliyâ'--whether physically present or through the spiritual archetypes communicated those local "literatures"--can only be grasped in light of their role in those specific, concrete contexts of individual spiritual teaching and practice.

The contemporary situation of thousands of African-American Muslims in the process of discovering and elaborating their own authentic forms of Islam--typically with only a quite

that the immense corpus of hadîth (in both their Sunni and Shiite forms) constitute the paradigmatic example, the "prototype" as it were, for the subsequent creative development of all the Islamic humanities.¹⁰ Whatever their historical authenticity, the complex corpus of hadîth marvelously illustrates both the central Islamic assumption of the true "embodiment" of the spiritual teaching in the archetypal example of the walî (in this case the Prophet or Imams) and the fruitful, but problematic refractions of that living teaching through the particular perspectives and understandings of the many generations of individuals receiving and transmitting it. All the forms and dilemmas of later "mystical literature", and of the Islamic humanities more generally, are already reflected and often beautifully dramatized in that vast literature of hadîth.

limited contact with external traditions of Islamic literature and learning--is actually remarkably representative of the local situations historians discover, wherever sufficient evidence exists, as they move beyond the learned, urban and courtly circles that were until recently the primary subjects of Islamic history.

¹⁰In addition, from the point of view of the Islamic humanities, particularly at the level of popular, oral culture, the early religious forms of "tales of the prophets" (qisas al-anbiyâ'), along with similar stories about the life of Muhammad (the sîra) and the Shiite Imams, are at least equally as important in forming Muslims' images and understandings of the awliyâ' and their teachings as the accounts preserved in the form of hadîth, despite the fact that such forms of "popular" literature were later accorded much lower religious status in the opinion of religious scholars attempting to form a normative learned consensus around a limited "canon" of hadîth precedents used in constructing the various systems of Islamic law (fiqh). Unfortunately, there are still no serious scientific translations (i.e., with the indispensable explanatory and contextual matter) even of the major books of Sunni hadîth, while the fascinating collections of hadîth attributed to the early Shiite Imams--a remarkable window into the incredibly diverse religious world of the earliest Islamic centuries--remain terra incognita even to most specialized Islamic scholars; recent specialized inquiries have focused on narrow questions of "authenticity" and related isnâd analysis, in detailed polemic contexts. So it is all the more remarkable that, apart from the pioneering work cited at n. 2 above, there are still virtually no works devoted to hadîth (whether Sunni or Shiite) that would enable outsiders to perceive them in their fundamental religious role, in the wider Muslim community, as ongoing models of spiritual pedagogy and the insightful adaptation of Qur'anic teachings to different individual temperaments, interests and circumstances--precisely the function mirrored in the creation of the Islamic humanities and the activity of living awliyâ' in later local settings. (In the latter context, the hundreds of more specialized, often local handbooks and collections [arbacîn, etc.] are often more revealing, from the point of view of a student of religion, than the early canonical collections.) In this regard, it should be stressed that the oral transmission of individual hadîth continued to be widespread for centuries throughout the Islamic world, among muhaddithûn of all sorts (including many famous Sufis), long after the written collection and subsequent diffusion of the "authentic" (sahih) texts underlying the narrower needs of certain groups of jurists beginning in the 3rd/9th century.

At this point non-Islamicist readers might well object that all of this must be so obvious as scarcely to require mentioning. The problem, however, is that this "self-evident" observation happens to run counter to some of the most fundamental paradigms, both normative and historical, underlying the classical Arabic "religious sciences" as they were written down and elaborated by small influential groups of learned religious scholars (the 'ulamâ') in the scattered cities of the Muslim world from the 3rd/9th century onward. (More recently, the same scripturalist and historicist paradigms have been perpetuated--for a wide range of reasons, and in many cases quite unconsciously--both by some Western students of Islamic traditions and by Muslim ideologists interested in manipulating them in novel ways within the context of new nation-states.) From the perspective of those scholarly paradigms, the revelation of the Qur'ân was considered as inseparable, both temporally and normatively, from the equally "revealed" teachings recorded and conveyed by the authentic hadîth and--in practice--from the related auxiliary Arabic linguistic and interpretive sciences. Together these Arabic textual studies came to be viewed by this small group of learned interpreters as constituting religious "Knowledge" ('ilm) par excellence, the joint and unique foundations or "sources" (usûl) from which they could then derive, in a variety of ways, their own authoritative standards of properly Islamic practice and belief.¹¹

¹¹Or more precisely, the limited acceptance, for practical legal purposes within certain schools of fiqh, of one or more of the ostensibly "canonical" hadîth collections. (The criteria of isnâd criticism, within the science of hadîth, are at best a loose limit on the diffusion of the most obviously invented hadîth, and do not seriously enter into questions of the authenticity and significance of the actual text of most reports.) As indicated in the preceding note, the religious importance of that hadîth "canon" and the conflicting claims of its legal interpreters, were often disputed or simply ignored by a wide range of subsequent "traditionists" and mystics alike--not to mention the irrelevance of such criteria at the (religiously crucial) popular level of storytelling and preaching. For understandable reasons, subsequent learned Muslim scholars, whatever their school, have rarely cared to point out to what an extent even the earliest, most widely respected Arabic works of legal interpretation, Qur'ânic commentary, and biographies of Muhammad are inextricably grounded in an immensely complex body of oral traditions (by no means limited to the hadîth) written down many decades or even centuries after the events they recount. More inexcusably, the naive repetition of this particular paradigm of Islamic religious scholarship in most non-specialized modern Western accounts of the religion of Islam has of course tended to obscure the multitude of competing, at least equally influential visions of religious authority, "knowledge", tradition and practice which have in fact informed the historical landscape of so many Islamic societies from the death of Muhammad down to the present day.

Thus the learned elite purveyors of those Arabic religious disciplines, while constituting themselves as the (self-appointed) authoritative interpreters of that wider Prophetic legacy, at the same time at least theoretically conceived of the immense majority of their fellow Muslims--especially such groups as women and illiterate rural and tribal peoples--as condemned to a doubly degenerate state of belief and practice. For according to their twofold "trickle-down" model of Islam,¹² even the most learned and zealously pious students of these Arabic sources would necessarily come to be increasingly removed from the pure ideal represented by the short-lived Medinan community (or the earliest Imams), while the vast majority of Muslims could only imitate, at an even further remove, the various models of belief and behavior developed and expounded by this handful of learned interpreters.

From the standpoint of those later learned men, the Islamic humanities (both oral and written) and their representatives and creators could represent at best only an approximation to (or inevitable "compromise" with) their own authoritative standards of properly religious knowledge and behavior. 13-It should be stressed that the points of view of the *culamâ'* in this very broad sense, except for the rare cases where a particular group was given a monopoly on political power, were never monolithic: typically one finds in any locality and period a profusion of legal, theological and other schools (*madhhabs*) or "ways of going about" interpreting the wider body of Sunni or Shiite learned traditions. Likewise one typically finds a wide range of alternative attitudes at the "interface" between those learned Arabic traditions and the actual local practice of Islam: e.g., in the constant legal interaction between abstract *fiqh* and local "custom" (*câda*), or in the differing *fatwâs* concerning the supposed religious status of music, saints, shrines, tombs, vernacular languages and forms of prayer and ritual, and so on. At worst, of course, the popular Islamic humanities, especially in their oral and non-learned forms, tended to appear from that viewpoint as "deviant" and ignorant "survivals" of pre-Islamic "customs," as the unmentionable--if sometimes practically unavoidable--"superstitions" and "popular" or even

¹²A particularly extreme (and historically influential) case of this religio-historical paradigm is beautifully illustrated in the polemic work translated by M. U. Memon as *Ibn Taymîya's Struggle against Popular Religion* (Mouton/The Hague, 1976). (It should be kept in mind that Ibn Taymîya was widely considered a fanatical "crackpot" in his own day and a marginal figure, at best, for centuries to come. His modern popular appeal reflects radically different world-historical and cultural circumstances.)

"nominal" religion of women and children, illiterate peasants and the masses of uncultured, only partly "Islamicized" tribal peoples.¹³

But that immense majority of less learned Muslims in the past, in all the regions of the Islamic world, certainly did not have to wait for the insights of modern students of religion, or the discoveries of modern ethnologists and social historians, to expose the many theological and historical fallacies and the ill-concealed political and cultural pretensions of that scripturalist paradigm of the 'ulamâ'. Thus most of the types of "theoretical" mystical writings discussed below, for example, were in fact created precisely to defend the practices and presuppositions of the wider Islamic humanities--whether in their high-cultural and learned, or their oral and popular forms--by transforming or even replacing influential versions of that religious paradigm, either by exposing its theological and metaphysical inadequacies or by articulating the alternative spiritual claims of particular representatives of the awliyâ'. And of course in many parts of the Islamic world people went on creating and living out the more practical local forms of the Islamic humanities, as they do today, without overly worrying about the disputes and alternative visions of those often far-off urban male learned elites.¹⁴

¹³We have intentionally highlighted these key code-words of modern Islamicist political ideologies--too often naively repeated in uninformed scholarly as well as journalistic discourse--to help suggest the curious process of hybridization through which historically alien religious conceptions, most often reflecting Western Protestant or Marxist cultural paradigms, have been grafted with traditional paradigms of Islamic scholarship to give rise to such peculiar categories and typifications of various Muslim peoples. as, for example, "peripheral", "nominal" or merely "traditional" (vs. "believing" or "practicing" or "authentic"), first under colonial regimes and even more pervasively under the pressing ideological demands of recently created nation-states. The essential point to bear in mind is that such ideologically motivated accounts--each claiming paradoxically to represent an (as yet imperfectly realized) "traditional" Islam-- clearly have very little to do with how Muslims in general (and more particularly those groups thus typified) have actually viewed their faith and relations to God.

¹⁴See the particularly insightful illustration of this much wider phenomenon, in the case of one mountain village during the recent "Islamic Revolution," in R. Loeffler's *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, 1988) and E. Friedl's *Women of Deh Koh: Lives in an Iranian Village* (Washington, 1989). For similar phenomena in a wide variety of more urban, Arab contexts, see the revealing anecdotes throughout M. Gilsenan's *Recognizing Islam* (London, 1983). Closer to home, the pioneering research of Beverly McCloud (n. 24 below) provides fascinating firsthand descriptions of the same creative elaboration of meaningfully Islamic forms--often in conscious opposition to alien cultural models of custom

Here again, the great obstacle for students of religion approaching the texts of Islamic "mysticism" is that any adequate phenomenological description of their social and historical contexts--assumed by the original authors and audiences alike--is still often inaccessible to non-specialists. The invaluable contributions of recent studies of the social history of all periods and regions of the Islamic world in revealing those local contexts, and especially in highlighting the immense lacunae in our knowledge of earlier Islam societies and the actual religious lives and practice (most notably of women and tribal peoples) outside a handful of urban cultural centers, have not even begun to be assimilated in surveys of Islam intended for non-specialists.¹⁵ And the

and behavior--among small communities of African-American Muslim women with only the most tenuous contacts to learned Arabic traditions of religious scholarship.

¹⁵The amazing coexistence of scholarly handbooks on Islamic religion conveying, if anything, increasingly ideological and ahistorical portrayals of "Islam" (in terms of supposedly normative doctrines, practices, etc.) at precisely the same time as hundreds of detailed historical studies, in both Western and Islamic languages, have come to highlight the grave limits and constantly shifting motives and meanings of such idealized paradigms in any particular period and locale, is a curious paradox deserving its own study in the sociology of knowledge.

For students of religion interested in delving into that already immense recent historical literature--and for the time being, given the absence of reliable historical syntheses (especially with regard to popular culture and non-urban populations), no serious understanding of Islam, including Islamic "mysticism," is really possible without immersing oneself in many such detailed local studies--two important cautions are in order. First, many of those recent historical inquiries are linked to the development of new nation-states and a naturally renewed interest by local scholars in their national "roots" and in "popular" movements conceived in modern national terms. The common danger in all such cases is an inadequate awareness of the wider relevance and interconnections of many areas of Islamic culture in pre-modern times, both of learned religious literature and of the written and oral Islamic humanities, in ways that usually transcend contemporary national, regional and linguistic boundaries. In the West this problem is aggravated by even more artificial recent "area studies" divisions in scholarly treatments of the Islamic cultures in question.

The second, less obvious, major barrier for students of Islamic religion, is that historical studies with rare exceptions focus on what is viewed as politically or historically "significant" and unusual "behavior"--i.e., on what stands out, often in terms of violence, rebellion, etc.--and not on the "longue durée" and the more universal, by definition almost "invisible," spiritual dimensions of religious life. In the present context, for example, the pitfalls of this outlook are especially obvious in the focus of many studies of "Islamic mysticism" on the charismatic leaders of Sufi orders functioning as political leaders of anti-colonial resistance in the 19th century (e.g., the Mahdi in the Sudan, the Sanusiya in Libya, °Abd al-Qâdir in Algeria, Shâmil in the Caucasus, etc.), or on the equally striking case of Shah Ismail and the Safavid movement. For a student of Islamic religion, such studies often do not even pose the key questions: the

equally important detailed descriptions of individual local Muslim communities (usually rural or tribal) by anthropologists and ethnographers in this century likewise have typically been carried out, in all but a handful of exceptional cases, in unfortunate ignorance of the historical depth and cultural complexities of the Islamic humanities and the widespread interplay of their localized forms with more learned traditions, especially those associated with Islamic mysticism.¹⁶

The fundamental relevance of the growing evidence from these disciplines for situating Islamic "mysticism" can be stated very simply: the closer one looks at the actual lives of

"charisma" of religio-political leaders, as we know from experience, can be demonic or divine; and the thousands of "saints" who do correspond to Muhammad's description (n. 2 above), whose teaching and example gives meaning to Islam and continues to guide other Muslims' lives throughout the world, rarely enter anyone's historical chronicles (at least until after their death).

¹⁶Since the very existence and multiple functions of the local Islamic humanities, much less their central role in the actual religious life of Muslims everywhere, are not even acknowledged in most non-specialist introductions to Islamic religion, anthropologists working in every area of the Muslim world have tended to assume the historicist paradigm of the 'ulamâ' represents a descriptive as well as normative account of "Islam"--and thus have inevitably found it irrelevant (or hostile) to what they actually do observe in many local oral or written cultures somehow "remote" from the representatives of that elite learned Arabic tradition. (As noted above, that paradigm, in any of its variants, was certainly never historically descriptive, and could be construed as "normative" only in continually controversial and politically shifting sense.) The resulting difficulties in perceiving the centrally "Islamic" character of a multitude of local practices and attitudes conveyed by and centering on the awliyâ' have only been aggravated by further intellectual interference from more recent Islamicist ideologies and other, often competing, nationalist accounts of the same local cultural phenomena.

Students of Islamic religion, however, face a much more daunting obstacle in attempting to "translate" the data of anthropological and ethnographic studies into religiously meaningful terms in a way that will reveal the essential interconnections between specific local practices and the more learned, "mystical" forms of the Islamic humanities. Since the meaningfulness of those local forms (literary, poetic, musical, etc.) depends on their capacity to awaken, within each participant, the awareness and practice of the universal spiritual virtues which are the heart of the Qur'ânic focus on Dîn ("Religion" in the sense of the intimate relationship between each soul and God), they are likely to be quite opaque to observers who are not looking for them or who are unwilling actually to enter into that spiritual life. Since there is ordinarily nothing in the liberal arts background or professional training and preoccupations of anthropologists that would lead them to take that central dimension of the Islamic humanities seriously, it should not be surprising if even the best available ethnographic material on the religious life of Muslims (including "mystical" groups and practices) in any part of the world is rarely very accurate or helpful in communicating the spiritual life and experience of the individuals it attempts to describe. In fact, works of "fiction" from the same Muslim societies are typically far more effective in communicating the religious content and meaning of the local Islamic humanities.

individual Muslim women and men in any period (including the learned male scholarly elites), the harder it is to discern any indigenous literary or cultural category or social institutions (including those associated with "Sufism") that could somehow be singled out as uniquely or authoritatively representing "Islamic mysticism". At best, as in the fitting title of A. Schimmel's classic study, one can speak broadly of the "mystical dimensions" of virtually every aspect of Islamic life and culture in the pre-modern world. Time and again, when one looks at the actual historical contexts, it turns out that what have often been identified as "mystical" practices or writings were in fact integrally embedded in the wider Islamic humanities, or what outside observers have often so revealingly labeled as "popular"--i.e., actually lived--religion and spirituality.

To give only a few examples directly illustrating the following discussion of the types of mystical literature, the repeated invocation of divine Names (the prayer of dhikr, or "remembrance" of God) turns out to be not simply a central "Sufi" ritual, but in some areas an important part of funerals and a common stage in the religious education of young people, who learn (even before the canonical prayers) the "Most Beautiful Names" and their recitation with the aid of prayer beads--a practice carried on throughout life without presupposing any official affiliation to a particular Sufi order. Likewise periodical visitations (ziyârât) to the shrines and tombs of saints (and prophets, Imams, and some of their descendants) and associated festivals have long been an integral part of ritual and family life in virtually every region, with more widespread participation even today than the Hajj which typically figures so prominently in textbook accounts of Islam. And even more common and spiritually significant--if less visible--are the diverse practices of offerings, prayers, sacrifices and vows in connection with those dreams, spiritual visions, intuitions and blessings that are each individual's decisive proof of the effective (and affective) power of a given walî. Finally, at least in traditional settings throughout much of the Eastern Islamic world, "mystical" and devotional poetry (frequently in conjunction with music) is often not just an incidental ornament or illustration of some more learned Islamic teaching, but in fact the primary vehicle for discovering and formulating the "mystical" dimension of the spiritually significant experiences and situations constantly arising

in everyday life.¹⁷ There those compelling vernacular poetic literatures and vast repertoire of popular stories about the prophets and saints are the equally complex equivalent in the Islamic humanities of the multitude of spiritually significant tales and legends--likewise only partially "scriptural"--whose reminders are built into the stained glass windows and elaborate stonework of Chartres and other medieval cathedrals.¹⁸

III. Types of Mystical Writing: Texts and Contexts

The following basic typology should help to bring out the importance of the actual contexts of the various writings often associated with Islamic "mysticism", contexts which are rarely discussed in adequate detail in the still limited set of translations or analytical discussions of those texts available to non-Islamicists. This schematic analysis is based on an extremely simplified consideration of the main audiences and subjects of that literature, a procedure that is subject to several important qualifications mentioned below. A few reliable English translations are cited as illustrations in each case, as an aid to those working in related fields who might wish to use such texts in teaching or comparative studies.

¹⁷To give a few more particular illustrations from the Persianate cultural sphere (from southern Iraq to Tadjikistan and northern Pakistan), one could mention the frequent divinatory consultation (fa'l) of the mystical poetry of Hafez in any life-situation requiring spiritual guidance; the central place of the *Dîvân* of Hafez on the *haft sîn* table at the center of the monthlong New Year's celebrations (Now Rûz); or the preeminent place of Rumi's *Dîvân-i Shams-i Tabrîz* (alongside the *Qur'ân*) in mosques of Ismaili Shiite communities throughout that region. In such situations even the most "illiterate" villager often knows thousands of verses of these mystical poets by heart, recalling the appropriate ones whenever the corresponding experience arises.

Only those who are aware of the pervasive spiritual functions of these locally rooted Islamic humanities, or of their vernacular equivalents throughout other parts of the Islamic world, can begin to appreciate the devastating religious and cultural impact (potentially deeper than many earlier invasions, or even the script "reforms" of an Ataturk or Stalin) of the recent replacement of those local Islamic humanities in so many areas by newly invented national ideologies (Islamicist or other) and compulsory public "education" in them.

¹⁸G. John Renard's forthcoming study of *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia, SC, 1992), is a remarkably comprehensive synthesis of the corresponding visual and epic "iconography" of the local Islamic humanities, including relevant "mystical" dimensions, in many regions of the Islamic world, from West Africa to Indonesia. See also the forthcoming volume by A. Schimmel, et.al., *The Popular Muhammad: The Person of Muhammad in Muslim Folk Poetry* (Columbia, 1992).

The most fundamental distinction one immediately encounters in considering Islamic "mystical" texts is that between works addressed to the relatively small network of scholars conversant with the learned traditions of the religious and "rational" (i.e., philosophic, scientific, medical, etc.) sciences, which were usually written in classical Arabic¹⁹--works that we may broadly characterize as "theoretical" in their format and audience--and a vastly more complex and diverse literature of the Islamic humanities, both written and predominantly oral, in a multitude of languages, intended for the practical spiritual instruction or edification of far wider audiences. These latter, more practical types of writing typically share a common concern with directly communicating, in a locally meaningful form, essential spiritual teachings of the Qur'ân and hadîth.²⁰

The selection of writings included in the following categories roughly corresponds to the broad set of subjects that are commonly associated with "Islamic mysticism" in modern translations and discussions by students of other religious traditions. But in reality this standard selection is somewhat arbitrary and artificially limited in a number of crucial respects that must constantly be kept in mind if one is to appreciate the distinctive roles of these specific types of writing within the much wider complex of the Islamic humanities and their actual religious functions in particular local contexts.

¹⁹Or occasionally in Persian (or Ottoman Turkish), which often functioned as the lingua franca of intellectual and religious elites in many regions of the Eastern Islamic world down to the present century. It should also be stressed that many of learned, "theoretical" Arabic texts in question were (and are) equally inaccessible to Arabic speakers without years of initiation and study of those learned traditions--and that Arabic-speaking regions had their own local "Islamic humanities" (both oral and sometimes written), which have only very recently begun to interest students of religion.

²⁰These practical spiritual writings, it should be noted, are usually quite distinct from the a wide range of vernacular works intended for the "popularization" or vulgar assimilation of the learned Arabic religious and rational sciences. The spiritual, aesthetic and ethical sophistication that typifies the adaptation of the traditional Islamic humanities in their local contexts, where (reflecting the Qur'ânic perspective) they are integrally adapted to the spiritual capacities and life-situation of each individual, offers a particularly radical contrast with the alien models of "religious education" and "Islamicization" (formulated in conceptual, often purely ideological terms and typically directed to the lowest common denominator) adopted by the national systems of compulsory public education in certain modern Muslim states.

To begin with, the typology of "mystical" writings outlined here does not directly include the traditional complex of Arabic "religious sciences" (fiqh, kalâm, usûl al-fiqh, tafsîr, hadîth, related linguistic and historical studies, Arabic calligraphy, and the like), even though all of those disciplines have frequently been used and construed as important, even integral aspects of mystical or spiritual paths in various Islamic contexts by some of the learned elite to whom they were directly accessible.²¹ More importantly, we have left out of consideration here the vast realm of supposedly "non-religious" local literatures²²--e.g., forms of epic poetry, "folk-tales", proverbs and fables, traditional (family, tribal, etc.) genealogies, histories and legends, etc.--and related practices, even though those forms of the Islamic humanities are frequently central to the actual understanding and symbolic articulation of religious and spiritual experience in each local context. Hence the following typology of audiences and subjects, it should be stressed, is not directly based on any traditional literary genres: one could give both prose and poetic illustrations, in both written and oral expression, for each category of "mystical" writing outlined below. And certainly many of the classic, most lastingly and widely influential vehicles of the Islamic humanities (such as the hadîth themselves, the Ihyâ' ʿUlûm al-Dîn of Ghazâlî, or the epic accomplishments of poets like Rumi, Attar and Hafez) include virtually all of the following categories.

Even more fundamentally, the actual spiritual functions of the limited types of writing discussed below in practice overlap and intersect with an far more extensive and diverse network of other forms of local practices, rituals, iconographies, social patterns and cultural assumptions

²¹Those possibilities are well illustrated in some of the well-known later writings of al-Ghazâlî, and even more voluminously throughout the works of Ibn ʿArabî; in the Twelver Shiite context, see the philosophic commentaries on the Qur'an and a popular Shiite hadîth collection by Mulla Sadra (summarized in the Introduction to our translation of *The Wisdom of the Throne*, Princeton, 1981).

²²I.e., all the literatures and other ethically and aesthetically significant local activities and customs which don't happen to fit within the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of the ʿulamâ' discussed above. This artificial separation from the whole local complex of the Islamic humanities is especially devastating for anyone attempting to discover the actual spiritual dimensions of Muslim women's religious lives (since, not surprisingly, they do not necessarily mirror learned urban male accounts of what is "Islamic") or looking at anthropological work on religion in Muslim peasant or tribal communities outside the "Middle East".

which can differ radically from one family, quarter, village or tribe even to its nearest neighbors. Whether any aspect of a particular Islamic socio-cultural context (including its written and oral literatures) actually operates as--or is perceived as--"mystical" (or "religious", "Islamic", etc.) raises thorny questions of individual realization and broader cultural definition that are at least as complex and controversial in those local contexts as are their more familiar metaphysical and scholarly counterparts. Within the major urban centers of Iran, for example, such widespread rituals and practices as the ceremonies surrounding the solar New Year (Now Rûz)--or the recitation of Ferdowsi's epic *Shâhnâme* (and its popular retellings); the extraordinary intertwinings of polite language (*ta'ârrof*) and social etiquette and norms; the *zûr-khâneh* (men's "gym"); the craft guilds and bazaar associations; mastery of *shekasteh* or other scripts; diverse items of dress; or the host of special foods and offerings whose preparation is prescribed for even relatively minor passages in life--have all taken on "mystical" meanings for individual Muslims and even for wider communities at different times.²³ And if one looks more closely, it turns out that the same dynamic, creative processes go on today--likewise with virtually no traditionally learned or formally "Islamic" literary input, and often without public documentary manifestations--within the families and communities of African American (and other American) Muslims today.²⁴

For two major forthcoming works that break down these barriers and begin to explore the unexamined religious dimensions of these Islamic humanities, see n. 18 above.

²³For an impressive portrait of those religious realities in an urban, educated setting, see such memoirs as S. M. A. Jamâlzâdeh's *Isfahan is Half the World* (Princeton, 1983), or--for a woman's perspective--S. Guppy's more recent *The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood* (Boston, 1988). For the very different religious world of villagers not far away, see the work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

²⁴See the Ph.D. dissertation of Beverly McCloud (Temple University, Dept. of Religion, 1991) on the religious lives of three generations of Muslim women from five local African-American Islamic communities in Philadelphia. The total absence of published documentation on the actual religious life of those thriving, decades-old and quite indigenously American contemporary Muslim communities should serve as a sufficient caution to those who might assume that the fundamental problems of perception and presentation of Islamic religion and mysticism highlighted in this paper are simply the result of distance (in time or space) and relative unfamiliarity of foreign Muslim communities and religious practices. On the other hand, if the religious lives of these thousands of Muslim neighbors and colleagues have remained quite literally "invisible" to American religious scholarship for decades, hopefully that should suggest

Finally it should be obvious that the actual "mystical" or spiritual functioning of any of these forms of the Islamic humanities--at least in any deeper and consistently meaningful sense--still depends above all on the very different ways in which individual Muslims actively appropriate and experience them. At least for each of the "practical" categories of mystical writing, one could easily cite a long continuum of illustrations stretching from undeniably spiritual expressions to relatively banal, traditionally "folkloric" or even more grossly "superstitious" and mundane uses.²⁵ (Perhaps that essential contrast is most obvious in the remarkable range of cultural and individual uses of the "occult sciences", like alchemy, astrology or numerology, and of their psychic and cosmological symbolism.) In fact, just as with the full corpus of hadîth, one often tends to find the ostensible "extremes" of that spectrum of spiritual realization contained within the same literary work, or expressed at times in the life and activities of a single individual.

IV. Practical Types

-- "Music" in the broadest possible sense²⁶--including the various forms and ritual circumstances of Qur'ân recitation; all the expressions of group prayer ceremonies (dhikr), whether chanted or accompanied by instruments; as a common setting for the classics of mystical lyric poetry; at saints' shrines and festivals; and within a host of other religious rituals and life-cycle ceremonies--remains fundamental to any serious phenomenology of religious and mystical

something of the reliability of portraits (and prejudices) drawn from far more distant worlds and vastly more limited and problematic sources.

²⁵This continuum of radically different spiritual perspectives, within the essentially common oral religious culture and background of a single Iranian village, is beautifully illustrated by the various individual world-views portrayed in the major work by R. Loeffler cited at n. 14 above.

²⁶We must stress the phenomenological inclusiveness of this dimension of Islamic "mysticism" because so many textbook accounts of this subject in Islamic contexts have unfortunately portrayed as either (unquestionably) normative or descriptive a multitude of highly problematic legal/theological categories and opinions: e.g., between "permitted" chanting or recitation of divine Names and "illicit" forms of singing or instrumental music; or between "religious" or "Islamic" ceremonies and "folk" customs or "local" rituals. Such widespread misconceptions of the Islamic humanities do beautifully illustrate the presuppositions and dangerous limitations of the historicist and scripturalist paradigms of certain 'ulamâ' discussed above.

life in most Muslim societies, and to even the most elementary understanding of the Islamic humanities. Fortunately, students of religion now have at their disposal, even without travelling, a rapidly growing range of recordings and descriptive studies sufficient to give some idea of the centrality of music in a wide variety of Islamic spiritual paths and disciplines, especially in those rural, tribal and "popular" contexts so often neglected in general works on Islam.²⁷

As a revealing contrast, studies of architecture and other visual arts as manifestations of the Islamic humanities--and more particularly in their relations to mystical and spiritual dimensions of Islam--have apparently been greatly limited by the art-historical disciplines' classical focus on a canon of "great" works or monuments associated with a select group of urban centers of patronage, trade and power, as well as by highly inappropriate, culturally limited definitions of what constitutes "fine" and minor or "decorative" (or "civilized" and "primitive") arts.²⁸ Certainly scholars are now paying increased attention to such relatively

²⁷The pioneering work that comes closest to conveying the religious and spiritual dimensions of such music--truly a model in this field of Islamic studies--is E.H. Waugh's superb *The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song* (Columbia, SC, 1989). Two other excellent recent studies of even more explicitly "mystical" Islamic music and associated rituals, in related, yet very different religious worlds, are R. Burckhardt Qureshi's *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge, 1986, with cassette tapes); and *The Art of Persian Music*, by J. Dering, et. al. (Washington, 1991, with compact disc).

For Qur'ân recitation, which is an indispensable key to the understanding and genesis of so many of the visual and musical forms of the Islamic humanities, see K. Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ân* (Austin, 1985), and chapters 7-9 of W. Graham's *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, 1987).

Despite the publicly visible importance of dance in the local Islamic humanities throughout great parts of the Islamic world, whether in sessions of Sufi dhikr and other undeniably "religious" ceremonies involving spiritual states and trances, or in celebrations of weddings and other major feasts, useful ethnographic films and documentaries (not to mention articles or books) in this area are still extremely rare. Again the virtual nonexistence of serious studies of this subject perfectly illustrates the insidious role of the above-mentioned learned paradigms of Islamic religion in concealing key elements in even the most elementary phenomenology of Muslim spiritual life in those many regions where such dance forms are religiously important, as well as in blocking any appreciation of the typical interpenetration of "mystical," Sufi practices and wider customary forms of popular religiosity in such Islamic settings (including the lives of contemporary American Muslims).

²⁸Of course even those visual arts which are clearly "major" in the more familiar Islamic contexts (calligraphy, ceramics, textile design, metalwork, carpets, books and their illumination, etc.) are typically not at the center of aesthetic reflection and esteem in the West. But even more

obvious phenomena as the interactions between mystical thought and literature and miniature paintings often produced in the same court settings, or to the social and political dimensions of Islamic "mystical" movements from the 13th through the 19th centuries, as their deeply rooted popular influences were mirrored in the fortunes of dynasties and the widespread official construction and endowment of saints' shrines, tombs, khanegahs, and the like. But the more widespread popular reflections and subtle influences of mystical teachings and practice in such culturally diverse forms as calligraphy (in all Islamic languages) and the aesthetics and iconography of textiles, clothing, jewelry, utensils, ceramics, and carpets; in tombs; and in the plethora of more "rustic" mosques, zâwiyas, Imâmzâdehs or jamkhânehs--especially as those physical creations interacted with particular local customs and social patterns--has yet to attract the same level of scholarly attention, above all with regard to those aspects that would most interest the student of religions.²⁹ Thus, apart from important studies of a few pre-modern cities and famous monuments, something as primordial as the concrete expression of the sacred and

striking in these art-historical disciplines is the unquestioned persistence of distinctions mirroring the earlier paradigmatic opposition of learned Arabic literatures and understandings of Islam to "popular", "local", "customary", or even "folkloric" forms of religious experience. Thus the artistic and aesthetic visual expressions of the Islamic humanities among supposedly "peripheral" Muslims in (not coincidentally) largely peasant or tribal areas like Indonesia and Malaysia, Central Asia, the Balkans and Caucasus, Kurdistan, West Africa, or the Swahili coast are typically ignored or at best mentioned in passing in virtually all textbook treatments of "Islamic art". Two remarkable recent exceptions which highlight many of those unwarranted assumptions and their blinding effects are L. Prussin's *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa* (Berkeley, 1985), and the forthcoming study by J. Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia, SC, 1992).

²⁹This area is especially relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the deeper spiritual roots and socio-cultural influences of Islamic "mysticism". Most obviously, in the actual practice of all these arts and music (in Islam as elsewhere) subtle "aesthetic" and "spiritual" values and disciplines are often inseparable. And in the everyday life of most Muslims, the deeper interpenetrations of spiritual life and the Islamic humanities were typically far more widely and profoundly mediated by these particular aesthetic forms--e.g., a few beautiful lines of calligraphy ("religious" or not); the properly moving recitation of the Qur'ân; the satisfying shape, color and decoration of a vessel for ablutions, a bookstand, or a set of prayer beads; the ornamentation of a mosque or saint's shrine; the inner layout of one's own house; or the complex religious associations of a simple reed pen--than by nominally or self-consciously "religious" concepts and teachings. The widespread neglect of this fundamental religiously mediating function of the popular Islamic humanities has led to a remarkable unconsciousness of the full extent of the profound religious and spiritual consequences simply of the most physical

physical space of Islamic spirituality and mystical practice in non-urban settings, from West Africa to China and Indonesia, necessarily continues to be another mystery to all those (including many Islamic scholars) who have not been privileged to travel and live in those unique local contexts and communities.

-- Reflecting the central focus in popular Islamic spirituality on sacred-human mediating figures (the *awliyâ'*, Imams, prophets and especially Muhammad and his Family and Companions) already discussed above, by far the largest category of mystical literature (including corresponding oral forms) consists of what could very broadly be called "devotional" literature: prayers, invocations, blessings and praises, and (at least in Shiite contexts) rites of mourning and elegies typically directed toward, or else produced by, those central theophanic figures.³⁰ In fact the importance of those human spiritual exemplars is so overwhelming in virtually every sphere of Islamic spirituality³¹ that in practice it is extremely difficult to separate

dimensions of "modernization," which may be even deeper than the transforming effects of national "religious education" discussed above.

³⁰One of the essential spiritual consequences of the continuum of *walâya* (the inner "proximity" connecting God, the *awliyâ'*, and each soul) is that in "repeating" any of the prayers and invocations of the prophets, Imams and saints--as preeminently in the universal daily ritual recitations of the Qur'ân itself--the Muslim worshipper is not simply reproducing or imitating someone else's prayers and devotions. Instead, what is ultimately aimed at and presupposed, in each of these endlessly diverse devotional forms, is a profound state of co-participation, if not spiritual union, with that divine Source.

In the Shiite *‘Ashûrâ* commemorations, of course, that inner spiritual connection is often sought (or manifested) in more physically palpable forms. In particular, the dramatic annual re-enactments of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in Twelver Shiite communities, which so remarkably illustrate the complex role of the Islamic humanities at the interface between learned Arabic and local religious traditions, have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. See, e.g., the pioneering work of M. Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the devotional aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shiism* (The Hague, 1978); and P. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (N.Y., 1979).

³¹Certainly this is no less true in most parts of the Islamic world, at the level of actual, observable religious and spiritual life, than with the roles of the corresponding sacred-human theophanies in Christian, Buddhist or Hindu spiritual practice. Again there is little or nothing in books about Islam intended for non-specialist readers that would even begin to suggest the importance and complexity of that dimension of Muslim spiritual life--although the widespread reactions underlying the "Rushdie Affair" may at least have suggested the popular centrality and sensitivity of this spiritual reality in certain Islamic contexts.

this category of spiritual writing and practice from almost all of the other "mystical" forms of the Islamic humanities discussed below: those other types of writing can all be understood (and often were consciously intended) as extended commentaries on one or another of these exemplary spiritual archetypes. The remarkable lack of translations³² of this kind of literature (not to mention in-depth studies of its actual religious functions in specific local contexts) may in part reflect the relative predominance of its oral or "popular", vernacular forms and more particularly its associations with that (supposedly) "silent majority"--i.e., Muslim women--whose actual

Along similar lines, one may note the even more egregious lack of focus on female spiritual archetypes (e.g., Fatima, Zaynab, Aisha, Khadija, and especially Mary--whose Qur'anic description sounds disconcertingly "Catholic" to many Protestant readers) in the religious lives of Muslim women from the most diverse cultural settings. (In this regard, see the recent pioneering article by E.B. Findly, "Religious Resources for Secular Power: The Case of Nûr Jahân", pp. 129-148 in *Colby Library Quarterly* XXV/1989.)

Above all, the peculiar domination of accounts of "Islam" by the theological categories and conceptions of small groups of learned religious scholars--or by the even more unrepresentative slogans of modern ideologists--apparently explains the refusal of most handbooks to recognize even the most obvious phenomena of Muslim spiritual life: namely, that depending on the particular devotional context, Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, Abbâs, Abd al-Qâdir, Mu'în al-Dîn Chishtî, and a host of other awliyâ' are appealed to directly and intimately, on the same terms and in the same diverse life-contexts, as with the devotional roles of Jesus, various bodhisattvas, and similar theophanies in other religious traditions. (For those who have not been able to witness this directly, the best approach is simply to observe the "lyrics" of virtually any of the available recordings of Islamic mystical and spiritual music, especially from ceremonies taking place in "traditional", less modernized rural or tribal contexts.)

³²The most comprehensive popular introduction remains C. E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London, 1960), while A. Schimmel's *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, 1985) provides profuse illustrations of these central religious expressions from many regions of the Islamic world, to be supplemented by the two major forthcoming studies cited in n. 18 above. See also W. Thackston's translations of Abdullâh Ansârî's classic Persian *Munâjât* (*Intimate Conversations*: N.Y., 1978 [Classics of Western Spirituality]).

Probably the most useful and sensitive introduction to this subject for the student of religions is to be found in W.C. Chittick's recent translation of Zayn al-cAbidîn's *al-Sahîfa al-Sajjâdiya: The Psalms of Islam* (London, 1988), especially the introductory explanations on "Prayer in Islam". However, what has so far been translated or studied is in no way indicative of the volume and importance of such works in actual Islamic humanities, "mystical" or otherwise. The most fundamental gaps remain the lack of reliable and readable, adequately annotated English translations of the major collections of hadîth (both Sunni and Shiite) and of Ali's *Nahj al-Balâgha*.

experience and practice of the spiritual life is still so strikingly absent from most of the available scholarly literature on Islamic religion.

-- It would certainly be tempting, especially for students of comparative mysticism and spirituality, to try to separate out from the above category texts concerned more specifically with the actual practice of methods of contemplation, meditation, visualization and related disciplines pursued in the Sufi orders and other "mystical" forms of Islamic religion.³³ The fact that such an effort would be doomed to failure even in the original languages reflects two fundamental and quite distinctive features of Islamic spirituality--both deeply rooted in the central mystery of the unique language and rhetoric of the Qur'ân--whose significance will be discussed in more detail at the end of this essay. First, from the time of Muhammad down to the present day, "mystical" or spiritual practices in Islam, despite all their diversity and changing forms, have typically not been viewed or portrayed as clearly distinct from the archetypal Prophetic model of constant prayer, devotion, awareness, vigil, fasting, and retreat--i.e., from the actualization of those more universal spiritual virtues which are the constant subject and aim of the Qur'ân itself. Secondly, for reasons also discussed below, detailed attempts to record or prescribe those spiritual practices in written form seem to have been virtually nonexistent. Even if translations were more widely available, the relatively few written works on such central mystical practices that do exist--such as summary accounts of the particular prayers and litanies associated with certain Sufi orders, catalogues of divine Names used for dhikr, or brief instructions on breathing or visualization--typically give no inkling of the complex, highly individualized application and adaptations of such procedures under the guidance of an accomplished master, nor of the critical process of their integration within the less "esoteric" (but no less indispensable) ethical and ritual forms shared with surrounding communities.

-- Perhaps the next most common form of Islamic mystical literature, and one equally inextricable from the wider complex of Islamic humanities, is that of lives of the saints (and

³³As for more "theoretical" accounts of those spiritual practices, combining metaphysical explanation and elaborate scriptural justifications, by far most complete and elaborate (and historically influential) versions in Islam are the detailed treatments of those subjects by al-Ghazâlî (in his famous "Revival of the Religious Sciences" (*Ihyâ' 'Ulûm al-Dîn*), now being systematically translated by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge) and by the famous

Imams and prophets). The formal grounding and inspiration of that immense and constantly accumulating mystical literature in the earlier Arabic prototypes of hadîth, the *Sîra* (Prophetic biography and legend) and the parallel popular genre of "stories of the prophets" should need no explanation.³⁴ But whether in the epic masterworks of Rumi and Attar or in the endlessly transformed oral versions of those often universal stories,³⁵ it is remarkable how consistently the

Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabî in his "Meccan Illuminations" (K. al-Futûhât al-Makkîya), discussed in sections V and VI below.

³⁴For Muhammad and his Companions, see Ibn Ishaq (trans. A. Guillaume), *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's 'Sîrat Rasûl Allâh'* (Oxford, 1955), and the adaptation of Ibn Ishaq by M. Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, which is more readable and especially sensitive to those dimensions which are central to Islamic spirituality and mysticism. For the early Shiite Imams, see Shaykh al-Mufîd (trans. I. K. A. Howard), *Kitâb al-Irshâd: The Book of Guidance* (London, 1981). And for the "tales of the prophets" genre, see al-Kisâʿî (trans. W. Thackston), *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisâʿî* (Boston, 1978); and J. Knappert, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam*, (2 vols., Leiden, 1985)--the second volume largely devoted to stories of Islamic saints and famous Sufis, especially ʿAbd al-Qâdir Jîlânî, from many parts of the Muslim world.

It is important to bear in mind that even in Arabic-speaking countries the Qur'an and hadîth have not been the primary vehicle for this communication of Islamic tradition for most Muslims throughout history. The learned understanding of Qur'anic language and contexts, requiring years of advanced study of many disciplines, is a very different matter from the far more common processes (in pre-modern contexts) of childhood memorization of certain verses for purposes of prayer, recitation, or even calligraphy. It is important to note that Muslims in the most disparate cultural settings (apart from the religiously learned elite) rarely distinguish in their awareness of spiritually significant stories between those conveyed by the local Islamic humanities, and those having their sources directly in the Quran or hadîth. Indeed the same spiritually significant stories are often told of or attributed to Muhammad, Ali, other saints and prophets, and heroes drawn from local vernacular epics and legends: see the many illustrations in J. Renard's forthcoming study cited at n. 18 above.

³⁵A widely accessible hagiographical work introducing the most famous spiritual exemplars of the early Sufi tradition is F. Attar (abridged trans. by A.J. Arberry), *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya'* (London, 1966). M. Sells is preparing a forthcoming volume of translated selections from many of the classical figures and texts of early Islamic mystical hagiography for the "Classics of Western Spirituality" series (Paulist Press). In English, two extensive illustrations of the integration of such stories in contexts of Islamic mystical teaching are Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* (trans. M. Darbandi and D. Davis, London, 1984), and R.A. Nicholson's 3-volume translation of *The Mathnawî of Jalâluddîn Rûmî* (London, repr. 1977).

Unfortunately, there are still no widely accessible studies of particular local Islamic communities that adequately communicate the essential process of "spiritual contextualization" provided by the Islamic humanities in their local (usually oral) contexts, the way "illiterate"

focus remains--as already in the hadîth--on the archetypal, on spiritually significant incidents or anecdotes intended to "illustrate" a more general, recurrent teaching. The absence of any tradition of self-consciously individualized spiritual "autobiography" providing a detailed and psychologically realistic account of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and initiation³⁶ is another of those distinctive characteristics of Islamic mystical writing whose origins and deeper significance will be explored in the concluding sections of this study.

-- The broad category of ecstatic sayings and metaphysical paradoxes (shatahât or Sufi "koans"), parables, aphorisms, and mystical tales³⁷--drawn both from exemplars in the Qur'ân,

individuals are often extraordinarily sophisticated in making the essential connections between each particular mystical story or saying (whatever its source) and the specific type of life-event or inner experience to which it is spiritually or ethically applicable.

³⁶Even such remarkable Shiite texts as the early Ismaili initiatic dialogue of *The Master and Disciple* (cf. our forthcoming Arabic edition and translation) do not really provide such an illustration: while the dramatic setting in that dialogue is clearly drawn, it is quite typically directed to bringing out the archetypal character of essential Qur'ânic passages, such as the encounter of Moses and Kheizr.

The handful of invaluable translations that do provide a more realistic picture of the actual processes of spiritual teaching and direction in very different Islamic cultural settings are not really exceptions to the above "rule" concerning the distinctive nature and limits of mystical writing throughout the Muslim world, since each of those books in fact reflects the extraordinary recording, by a contemporary observer, of typical cases of oral transmission and recounting of teachings and experiences which ordinarily would have remained an "invisible" and unrecorded part of the process of spiritual guidance between a master and disciple. See the relevant sections of M. Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawî (London/Berkeley, 1971); L. Brenner, *West African Sufi: The Religious Heritage & Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal* (London/Berkeley, 1984), especially the translated "spiritual discourses", pp. 157-192; and our translation (in preparation) of Nur Ali Elahi, *Athâr al-Haqq* (Tehran, 1366 h.s., 708 pp.).

³⁷See, for example, Ibn 'Atâ'allâh (trans. V. Danner), *The Book of Wisdom* (New York, 1978); al-Junayd (trans. A. H. Abdel-Kader), *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junayd* (London, repr. 1976), pp. 120-183; as well as the forthcoming volume of translations by M. Sells cited at n. 35; and S. Suhrawardi (trans. W. Thackston), *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardi* (London, 1982). At the more popular, oral level such spiritual sayings and riddles are woven throughout all the previously mentioned hagiographic tales of the saints and prophets, and even into the multitude of popular "jokes" and comic stories concerning such figures as Jûhâ or "Mullâ/Khojâ Nasruddîn".

The most glaring gap for this major genre of Islamic mystical writing is surely the lack of a complete English translation of any of the major collections of (and commentaries on) the Shatahât, the "metaphysical paradoxes" of the early Sufis discussed by C. Ernst in *Words of*

hadîth and prophetic tales, and from the accumulated wisdom of every preceding religious tradition--represents a familiar, abundant type of Islamic mystical literature in which it is often extremely difficult to draw any rigid boundaries between written and oral teaching, between commonplace proverbs and profound spiritual intuitions. To be sure, many such riddles, stories and poems are clearly protreptic, designed simply to awaken their readers' awareness of and interest in pursuing the deeper meaning behind the outward forms of religion and everyday experience. But again we have almost no scholarly literature that would adequately convey the complex higher religious functions of those short, easily memorable tales and sayings either as they are skilfully used by an accomplished master or as they resonate inwardly when their meaning is awakened in conjunction with the appropriate meditation or critical moment of spiritual insight.

-- Another important category of Islamic mystical writing, which has only begun to be explored, consists of more practical guides to spiritual life, whether focused on the "rules" of proper behavior (*adab*) to be followed by Sufi novices, outlines of the "stages of the path" and spiritual psychology, or in actual letters of direction or students' "transcriptions" (*malfûzât*) of a master's oral teaching to certain disciples.³⁸ Once again, students of comparative religion who gain some familiarity with the Islamic works of this type are likely to be somewhat disappointed; for in most cases, including the translations just cited, such writings tend to be repetitive and relatively elementary, or too sketchy and fragmentary to be fully meaningful. Rarely will one

Ecstasy in Sufism (Albany, 1985). Already in the Islamic world the profound linguistic difficulties involved with translating (as opposed to paraphrasing and explicating) such works in any language is reflected in the vast commentary literature, in several Islamic languages, relating to each of the above-mentioned types of mystical writing.

³⁸See, for example, Ibn ʿAbbâd (trans. J. Renard), *Ibn Abbad of Ronda: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (N.Y., 1986); S. Maneri (tr. Paul Jackson), *The Hundred Letters* (NY, 1980); N. Râzî (tr. H. Algar). *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return* (*Mirsâd al-ʿIbâd*) (N.Y., 1982); and U. Suhrawardî (transl. W. Clarke, from the Persian tr. by M. Kâshânî), *A Dervish Textbook from the 'Awârifu-l-Ma'ârif...* (London, repr. 1980). All of Ibn ʿArabî's writings, including the recent English translations of selections from his immense *al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*, contain extensive illustrations of all three of these types of practical mystical writing. However, a great deal of this more practical spiritual literature remains to be explored even in its original manuscript form, especially for later periods in such vast areas as Muslim India, Ottoman Turkey, sub-Saharan Africa, etc.; one can thus expect some of the most interesting new studies in the areas of Islamic spirituality and mysticism to emerge from investigations of this broad range of practical Sufi literature.

find, for example, any detailed, phenomenologically adequate account of the particular Islamic uses of fasting, prayers, vigil and spiritual retreat, or of the awareness and appropriate interpretation of dreams, intuitions, and other spiritually significant events which in reality are so central to actual situations of instruction and spiritual guidance.

-- Certainly the most problematic, but nonetheless extremely widespread and influential, category of Islamic mystical literature is the diverse group of so-called "occult sciences," including such complex fields as the multi-dimensional sciences of letters and numerology (jāfir and ʿilm al-hurūf); alchemy; astrology; talismans; chiromancy; and so forth.³⁹ This sort of writing and associated practice--in many cases reflecting a common symbolic and cosmological heritage shared with late Antiquity and the medieval West--spans an enormous range of manifestations in most Islamic societies, from highly theoretical treatments and profound mystical elaborations (detailing cosmological or subtle psychological processes) to popular "superstitions" and their own pragmatic uses. For a variety of reasons, neither of those extremes has yet been subject to much sustained scholarly attention in the Islamic context, while recent religious modernists and reformers have typically considered both learned and popular manifestations of these disciplines to be embarrassing relics of a backward, "pre-scientific" superstitious mentality. Thus accounts of Islamic mysticism and related arts and poetry for modern audiences have naturally tended to neglect the decisive importance of their communication of a "sacred canopy" of common cosmological symbols (including the omnipresent letters of the sacred alphabet) in accounting for the wider efficacy and persuasiveness of many expressions of the traditional Islamic humanities across the whole

³⁹The virtual absence of English-language studies and translations of such materials in no way reflects their relative importance in earlier forms of Islamic spirituality and mysticism. See our forthcoming review article of a number of recent French studies and Arabic editions in this field in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, and the vast amount of manuscript material (including only texts exclusively devoted to these subjects) in the bio-bibliographic survey volumes on early Arabic alchemy and astrology in F. Sezgin's *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*.

The most revealing introduction to the widespread uses of this genre in Islamic mysticism is the chapter by D. Gril (in French) on Ibn ʿArabī's understanding of the "science of letters", pp. 385-487 in the recent bilingual anthology from Ibn ʿArabī, *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, (Paris, 1989).

cultural spectrum from court poetry and learned sciences to the most remote local oral traditions.⁴⁰

-- Finally, there is the broad category of more direct expression, often in lyrical or even ecstatic poetic form, of actual mystical or spiritual experiences--a category which, because of its relative familiarity of subject and expression, has been a consistent favorite of modern Western translators.⁴¹ The popularity and immediacy of such classic texts, however, should not automatically be taken as an index of either their representative qualities or their adequacy for

⁴⁰See the representative illustration of these types of symbolism throughout our translation of "Ibn ʿArabī's Spiritual Ascension" (ch. 367 of the *Futūhāt*), pp. 351-438 and 574-607 in *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, (Paris, 1989). Materials of this type pose recurrent dilemmas for translators of Islamic religious writings into any modern language, since the related frameworks of cosmology, astrology, physics, physiology and numerology were often universally assumed in both learned and popular Islamic understandings even of the *Qur'ân* (and of the many *hadīth* on related cosmological matters) until modern times. Hence an adequate translation of such texts requires complex footnotes and detailed explanations, for the modern reader, of matters which were often implicitly assumed by pre-modern writers and audiences alike (very often in the Latin West as well): the situation is somewhat like attempting to explain a baseball sportscast (where the most complex rules and statistical categories are "obvious" to a numerically illiterate first-grader) to someone unfamiliar with that sport.

⁴¹Some of the more poetically approachable English translations, among a number of recent efforts, are the recent collaborative translations of *Rūmī* by J. Moyne and C. Barks, including *Open Secret* (versions from the *Rubā'iyāt*) and *Unseen Rain* (translations from the *Dīvān-i Shams-i Tabrīz*), (Putney, VT, 1984 and 1986). The immense bibliography of translations and studies of Rumi is also summarized in two complementary introductory and background volumes, W. C. Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, 1983) and A. Schimmel's *The Triumphal Sun: A study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi* (London, 1980).

The familiarity for Western audiences of Rumi's mystical symbolism (especially its frequently direct appeals to our experience of nature, or concrete images drawn from everyday life) and the relative lack of symbolic (though not musical) complexity of his poetic language helps to explain his great appeal to Western translators. (Similar points could be made about the popular Turkish mystical poetry of Yunus Emre: cf. *The Drop That Became The Sea: Lyric Poems of Yunus Emre*, tr. K. Helminski and R. Algan, Putney, VT, 1989.) However, it should be stressed that the mystical symbolism and poetic structures in the classical poetic expressions of the later Islamic humanities, at least in the Eastern Islamic world, are usually far more complex and indeed impossible to translate (at least as effective English poetry). Cf. the many attempts at translating the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, or the works of S. N. al-Attas on early Malay Islamic mystical poetry, including *The Mysticism of Hamza al-Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur, 1970).

depicting the broader spectrum of Islamic "mystical" practices and presuppositions. To take only one striking example, the predominance in Rumi's lyric poetry of universal images drawn directly from nature--even if those symbols are almost always intended as revelatory commentaries on familiar mystical themes from the Qur'ân and hadîth--surely helps explain the widespread appeal of his writing, especially to contemporary literary tastes. But the relative directness and simplicity of some of Rumi's poetry is far from typical of the highly stylized, formalistic rhetorical conventions of much later Islamic mystical poetry, with its complex, entirely untranslatable play of musical associations on a multidimensional repertoire of symbolic and metaphysical archetypes (again often scriptural in origin) shared by writer and audience (whether learned or "illiterate") alike. In those later, highly influential traditions, as exemplified in the incomparable Persian lyrics of Hafez, poetry comes to be seen less as a vehicle of communication of some particular "original" individual insight than as a subtle mirror reflecting and revealing the deeper, archetypal dimensions of each reader's/listener's own momentary spiritual state. So again it turns out that the more genuinely religious and "mystical" (i.e., not merely conventional) dimensions of that central type of Islamic literature--whether in its learned or vernacular expressions--can only be discerned in light of highly complex practical and cultural contexts that are typically assumed, rather than openly stated.

V. The Islamic Context of "Theoretical" Mystical Writings

It is important to note that the four broad types of "mystical" writing distinguished under this heading are relatively later phenomena in Islamic thought, since in both their Sunni and Shiite forms they presuppose the early foundational teachings of Muhammad and the Imams; then the broader development and spread of the earliest Arabic exemplars of the Islamic humanities (hadîth, Sîra, stories of the prophets, etc.);⁴² and finally the gradual intellectual

⁴²The actual processes of formation of "Islam" as a separate, self-consciously universal world religion during these first three centuries are still largely unexplored, or at best at the stage of working hypotheses in each of the relevant fields. (There is as yet nothing even remotely approaching the efforts that have been expended, for example, on exploring the comparable historical origins of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.) However, more detailed historical investigations can only show in much greater detail how what eventually came to be seen as "classical" learned Arabic religious disciplines actually represent only the earliest written stages of the Islamic humanities, reflecting the same processes of creative (and originally oral)

"crystallization" or increasingly sophisticated theoretical articulation in classical Arabic--throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Islamic era, in a few urban centers of the Abbasid empire--of alternative learned understandings of the proper implications and interpretations (social, political, spiritual and intellectual) of that accrued body of diverse religious traditions. During that period several schools of what have been loosely (and somewhat misleadingly) called Islamic "theology" gradually developed a shared vocabulary for articulating different visions of the Arabic religious sciences, 43 I.e., kalâm, usûl al-dîn, etc. In later periods these Arabic scholarly disciplines came to serve as a sort of "meta-theory" of scripturally based justifications for the epistemological, rhetorical and other axiological premises of the various systems of fiqh ("Islamic law"); and recent research is indicating that the supposed founders of these disciplines in earlier periods were actually often involved in a wide variety of more active socio-political movements. In either case, however, neither the meaning nor the functions of any of those particular Arabic disciplines, at any period, ever remotely corresponds in importance to what is suggested by "theology" in Christian contexts--above all because the historically and politically crucial complex of councils, creeds, clerics and episcopal and ecclesiastical structures (and all the related religious and philosophic assumptions) taken for granted in the evolution of Christianity never came to exist in Islamic contexts. While Farabi and others (including many translators) were likewise developing an Arabic philosophic language capable of expressing the universal insights and pretensions of the inherited Hellenistic scientific and philosophic traditions. The remarkably successful creative melding of those two conceptual universes by the philosopher Avicenna (d. 429/1037) eventually resulted in a complex shared philosophico-theological language which was used by most later Muslim intellectuals, until the present century, to articulate and defend their alternative visions of the proper theoretical and practical understandings of Islamic tradition. The most famous and lastingly influential "theoretical" expositions of Islamic mysticism--including especially those by Ibn ʿArabî (d. 1240) and Ghazâlî (d. 1111), whose works are still widely read throughout the Islamic world today--both drew upon and further transformed that distinctive philosophic and theological

individual expressions of Qur'ânic teachings in the context of the remarkable variety of pre-existing local cultural and religious traditions within the vast area of the initial Arab conquests. Again the existing hadîth collections--especially the still virtually unexplored materials on the early Shiite Imams--clearly represent many stages and facets of that long creative process.

vocabulary, which was freely adapted by most subsequent mystical writers in each of the four categories below.

Thus the place of these "theoretical" forms of Islamic mystical writing within this larger intellectual development--and more significantly, their relation to the more widespread popular and practical manifestations of mystical and spiritual teaching--was radically different from the role of outwardly similar intellectual forms developed in other religious or civilizational contexts. First, unlike the case of Hindu or Buddhist traditions, "mystical philosophy" (or theosophy) in a thoroughly speculative or primarily intellectual form hardly exists in the Islamic context. And those theoretical mystical writings that were produced in later periods were themselves rarely the inspiration of the far more extensive practical and devotional forms of mysticism spread by the Islamic humanities. On the contrary, even the types of theoretical writings discussed below appear relatively late and among a small intellectual elite, presupposing the complex of highly elaborated and deeply rooted practical mystical traditions they propose to justify or explain. Likewise these distinctively Islamic forms of theoretical mystical writing did not historically grow out of earlier "non-mystical" forms of religious tradition, nor are they typically conceived or presented as special "interpretations" or further spiritual dimensions of such non-mystical religious forms,⁴³ as in at least some historical presentations of kabbalah, for example.

⁴³The only even remote approximation to such an approach, at any point in Islamic history, is possibly to be found in certain rare forms of later (Nizari) Ismaili Shiism, in an extreme reaction by a threatened religious minority that at times came to present its Sunni Seljuk opponents as exclusively "exotericist". However, even in that case, as everywhere else in Islam, any such attempts to separate an "exoteric" *zâhir* from a spiritual or mystical *bâtin* ran up against the basic fact that in the Qur'ân itself explicitly "mystical", insistently universal teachings about the spiritual reality and destiny of human beings provide the primary context even for the (relatively few) specific "mundane" religious prescriptions.

Hence the more recurrently typical Islamic phenomenon--which continues to puzzle outsiders arriving with different expectations of "mysticism"--of a combination of exclusivist, even fanatical adherence to particular socially or scripturally "exoteric" versions of Islam combined with a curious insistence on highly original "mystical" forms of exegesis and spiritual practice. See, for example, in completely different Muslim traditions, such representative cases as the famous Hanbali Sufis Ansârî of Herat and °Abd al-Qâdir Jîlânî; the Shiite hadîth-based spirituality of the Shaykhî movement in Qajar Iran and Iraq; and the more recent Naqshbandî Sufi tariqa.

Instead, when one examines these texts more closely, it turns out that the majority of more theoretical writings about Islamic mysticism are in fact primarily self-consciously "political" works directed toward influential elites of urban religious intellectuals. Through the presumed authority and wider educational influences of those intellectual elites, these writings were typically intended to affect, transform or protect the relative positions and wider social implementation of what their authors considered more properly or effectively spiritual understandings of the local forms of Islamic tradition and practice. As such, they usually involved intellectual debate against justifications of alternative socio-political interpretations (or "abuses") of the same body of learned religious tradition. Hence in each case the actual practical implications of those seminal texts, both in their original historical contexts and in the controversies which have often swirled around them down through the centuries, only become clear when we can isolate in sufficient detail both the particular intended audience and the specific issues of interpretation and practice in question.⁴⁴ Whether they are viewed historically, practically or intellectually, the classic works of theoretical mystical writing in Islam thus appear as the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" in relation to the profuse forms of mystical and spiritual

⁴⁴The most prominent and enduring example of this process is the ongoing role of the works of the great 13th-century Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabî at the political and cultural interface between the learned Arabic sciences and various local expressions of the Islamic humanities down to the present day. Ibn ʿArabî's lasting impact on the Islamic humanities throughout the Eastern Islamic world is outlined in our 3-part monograph on "Ibn ʿArabî and His Interpreters", in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107-108 (1986-87), while "Ibn ʿArabî's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), outlines the philosophic and religious principles underlying the ongoing controversies surrounding those mystical texts. Th. E. Homerin, "Ibn Arabi in the People's Assembly: Religion, Press, and Politics in Sadat's Egypt", pp. 462-77 in *The Middle East Journal* 40 (1986) discusses recent efforts to suppress--and to support--the new, more widely readable) edition of Ibn ʿArabî's *Meccan Illuminations*. E.L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazâlî's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton, 1985), pp. 92ff., traces the disputes between local Sufi movements and their clerical opponents in many parts of the Muslim world, over several centuries, as expressed in criticisms or defenses of Ghazâlî and Ibn ʿArabî. And the polemic philosophic reaction of Ibn Khaldûn, foreshadowing modern "reformist" ideologies, is outlined in "Ibn Khaldûn's Critique of Sufism", forthcoming in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* III (1992).

practice developed and spread independently by the much larger body of the Islamic humanities in each local context.⁴⁵

Now the disproportionate emphasis of earlier Western translations and secondary studies on such theoretical expositions of Islamic mysticism is quite understandable in terms of the pioneering European scholars' natural interests in Islamic materials apparently comparable to their own "mystical" traditions, as well as the inherited expectations of their own audiences: the philosophic and theological vocabulary of those selected "mystical" texts is (or at least once was) more familiar to learned Western readers than the unfamiliar symbolic universes and complex socio-cultural presuppositions of the more widespread practical forms of the Islamic humanities. But the legacy of that problematic initial definition of "Islamic mysticism" has been to reinforce a potent combination of theological presuppositions and questionable historical paradigms that together have largely blocked a more adequate scholarly perception of Islamic "mysticism" (including the Islamic humanities)--and which by the same token have tended to obscure presentations of Islamic religious life more generally. Some of the resulting misunderstandings are still so deeply rooted that it is necessary to point out how they differ from the actual perspectives of the authors of both practical and more theoretical mystical writings in Islam.

To begin with, neither those Muslim authors nor their opponents tend to single out some separate realm of mystical or spiritual activities or experiences within the wider social and ontological domains of religion: typically there is no essential separation claimed or assumed between "letter" and "spirit", "law" and "grace", ritual and realization, etc. (The highly distinctive social and literary forms and assumptions peculiar to the various forms of Islamic "esotericism" discussed in section VII below are of a very different order.) Secondly, the fundamental focus shared by these theoretical writings--i.e., the realization of the spiritual virtues and their relation to the metaphysical ground and destiny of human souls--is itself at the very center of the explicit, "exoteric" Qur'anic text. Thus any sort of text or practice one might associate with Islamic "mysticism" almost inevitably turns out to be nothing more than a reminder or actualization (within a particular socio-cultural setting) of unduly neglected

⁴⁵Of course the most widely read of the learned Arabic, "theoretical" works on Islamic mysticism--above all the writings of Ibn 'Arabî and Ghazâlî--were at the same time extremely

fundamental aspects of those explicit scriptural teachings. The intimate, often inseparable relation between the outward forms and sacred-human exemplars of Islamic mysticism and those of popular religion, as well as the creative, ongoing development of the Islamic humanities in the most diverse cultural and social contexts, are rooted in the way those manifold cultural expressions return directly to the Qur'anic archetype and its explicitly metaphysical, trans-historical perspectives. More often than not the "theoretical" writers of Sufism or esoteric Shiism were simply articulating the theological and philosophic explanations (and scriptural justifications) for what ordinary Muslims (not just "mystics") were actually doing.

Thirdly, the fundamental issue at stake between virtually all the "theoretical" proponents of Islamic mysticism, both in Sunni and Shiite settings, and their opponents usually turns out to be the extremely practical--and indeed religiously unavoidable--question of the nature of the human spiritual exemplars⁴⁶ through which the full meaning of the revelation can be known and realized: i.e., who are those special persons (whether in this world or the "unseen"), and how can one best either locate and contact them (so as to follow their guidance and seek their aid and intercession) or else develop the spiritual qualities necessary to move toward that same state of perfection? Again, one may note (a) the fundamental continuities between Islamic "mysticism" and popular religious expressions on this point; and (b) the fact that this issue is likewise central to the Qur'anic teaching concerning the ongoing, universal realities and perennial spiritual functions of all the divine Messengers, prophets and angels.⁴⁷ So it should not be entirely

influential, both directly and indirectly, within all the more practical categories of spiritual writing already discussed above.

⁴⁶This basic distinguishing factor is operative whether those spiritual intermediaries are understood to be directly accessible in this material world, or in the spiritual world through dreams, visions, karamât and barakât (particular evidentiary "acts of grace" and "blessings") received through one or another of the awliyâ' (including the prophets). The range of possibilities and combinations of these intermediary figures (in either world) in the spiritual life and experience of any given Muslim is typically extremely broad and often only loosely connected with visible sociological or historical considerations. See the vivid contemporary illustrations of these phenomena in the visions recorded in M. Lings' *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1971) and in K. Ewing, "The dream of spiritual initiation...among Pakistani sufis," in *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17 (1990), as well as the profuse illustrations of such dreams and visions of the awliyâ' throughout the classical Sufi works already cited.

⁴⁷As Ibn ʿArabî and other Muslim mystics have repeatedly stressed, that broader Qur'anic teaching concerning the spiritual intermediaries also underlies the assumptions of the ʿulamâ'

surprising if in reality the differences of perception (and corresponding practice) between any two Muslim "mystics" concerning this fundamental religious question were (and still are) often at least as conspicuous as the differences separating either of them from many other groups of less avowedly mystical Muslims.

Finally, one can hardly exaggerate the determinative influence for the subsequent development of Islamic mysticism (including Shiite esotericism)--and for the evolution of the Islamic humanities more generally--of the unique historical circumstances (political, cultural and even geographical) which at critical moments prevented any single model or claimant from achieving anything approaching exclusive legitimacy for their claims to religio-political authority.⁴⁸ Far more than the few (and in fact not totally hostile) Qur'anic allusions to earlier clerical, kingly and monastic religious institutions,⁴⁹ it was the historically effective stalemate between the many competing paradigms of religious legitimacy during the first four formative centuries of Islam that kept the exemplary Muslim mystics of those periods from being either suppressed or routinely institutionalized (e.g., in monastic foundations, etc.) by any of those contending claims to religious authority. And it was the extreme fragmentation and instability of

about the inseparability of the Qur'anic message from the life and example of (at least) Muhammad--conceptions which are axiomatic for all the Arabic "religious sciences" claiming a religious authority for their interpretations of the corpus of hadith (and a similar premise for Shiite scholars taking a comparable stance with regard to the actions and teachings of their Imams, as well as Muhammad). Within the context of the Sunni religious sciences see the detailed explanations of this point, translated from Ibn 'Arabi's magnum opus, in *The Meccan Illuminations/Les Illuminations de la Mecque* (Paris, 1989), and W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of the Imagination* (Albany, 1989).

⁴⁸This is certainly not intended to deny the recurrent attempts (amply illustrated in virtually every generation down to the present day) to institutionalize virtually every conceivable human form of religious authority: e.g., Umayyad divine kingship; Shiite sacred priestship; clerical legalism; tribal factionalism (often combined with various forms of charismatic religious leadership); radically egalitarian antinomianism; Messianic personalism; the enlightened philosopher-king; sectarian "ethnic" minorities; etc. Here again, what is remarkable is how the manifold historical and contemporary illustrations of this decisive fact--and the remarkable ways those alternative forms of authority actually combine and co-exist in specific Muslim settings--are strangely absent from the many handbooks claiming to describe "Islamic religion."

⁴⁹At most, those Qur'anic passages have offered ammunition to critics of one or another of the religious models of authority in question. They certainly have never stopped the contending claimants of religious authority--even in cases grossly illustrating the Qur'anic

all but the most local political authorities for much of the next five centuries that allowed the awliyâ' (of very different sorts) and eventually the related Islamic humanities to take on their increasingly preeminent role in popular religious life and imagination from Africa to Central and South Asia.⁵⁰ Thus while non-Muslim observers from many backgrounds have continued to read their own models of "religion" and religious authority--including equally inappropriate notions of "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxy"--into the most diverse Islamic settings, modern historical research increasingly reminds us of the remarkable extent to which those decisive religious questions have actually remained creatively unsettled in past Islamic contexts, just as they so often still are today. Almost without exception, the masterpieces of Islamic mystical writing have been created in just such highly unsettled historical situations.

VI. "Theoretical" Types of Mystical Writing

-- The first common type of "theoretical" mystical writings to appear (in Sunni circles, at least) were relatively "defensive" or apologetic Arabic treatises, directed toward other elite religious scholars, proposing to demonstrate the consistency of already widespread popular Sufi practices and teachings with the particular religious standards and conceptions of that learned elite,⁵¹ while often attempting at the same time to establish religiously appropriate standards for

criticisms--from attempting to institutionalize their conceptions wherever political circumstances have permitted.

⁵⁰In Islamic history, as with humanity generally, there are ample illustrations of the principle that strong central governments prefer honoring dead saints to putting up with living ones. During this period, the frequent lack of inherent religious legitimacy of even the most powerful (often Turkic) local military regimes, throughout the central Islamic lands, typically led them to play off popular charismatic ("mystical") leaders and institutions against influential *ʿulamâ'* and other contending religious authorities. Detailed social-historical studies over the past three decades have added immensely to our understanding of these socio-religious processes in particular urban, rural and tribal Muslim contexts, although the largely intuitive summary of M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1973), vol. 2, remains perhaps the best available survey for non-specialists. The contrasting attitudes and actions of modern Islamic nation-states of all ideological colors toward both Sufism and other traditional forms of popular Islamic religion likewise vividly illustrate the profound influence of changing local political frameworks on the visible social expressions of Islamic "mysticism".

⁵¹Certainly the most widely translated illustration of this category is Ghazâlî's *al-Munqidh min al-Dalâl* ("The Deliverer from Error...") and other related works--e.g., in the version by R.J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazâlî's al-Munqidh min*

judging (and controlling) the various manifestations and perceived social or spiritual "dangers" of those popular spiritual movements.⁵² The religious problems and paradigms isolated at this early stage--e.g., the alternative attitudes toward the exemplary case of al-Hallâj's teaching and martyrdom, or the tragic events of Kerbala--tended to be repeated in such scholarly writings for centuries.

-- A second, far more complex category would include more ambitiously "offensive" writings aimed at explaining and revealing the centrality of the spiritual life and practices of the various mystical groups and the decisive importance of the awliyâ' (however understood) for properly interpreting and living out other learned forms of Islam--such as various Arabic religious sciences, or even the rational and philosophic sciences--ordinarily conceived of as being relatively separate from those spiritual matters. In a way, one could say that this type of Arabic mystical writings were essentially a more scholarly equivalent of what the spiritually oriented practical Islamic humanities were actually intended to do for Muslims in other walks of life. By far the most elaborate and historically influential illustration of this type of Islamic

al-Dalâl and Other Relevant Works... (Boston, 1980), with an extensive bibliography of other translations and studies of his works.

⁵²In Sunni circles, those more worldly and spiritual concerns alike were often expressed in discussions centering on the symbolic role of the early Sufi martyr al-Hallâj: see the monumental study by L. Massignon, (tr. H. Mason), *The Passion of al-Hallâj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton, 1982, 4 volumes), and the more accessible summary in C. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany, 1985). In approaching the recurrent critiques by 'ulamâ' (whether Shiite or Sunni) of "Sufism" and related movements and features of "popular" Islam, it is essential to keep in mind that one key dimension of the widespread popular respect for awliyâ' (of all sorts) in Muslim rural and tribal settings, from the earliest Islamic periods (various Kharijite leaders and Shiite claimants) down to the present day, was the ever-present potential for protests, revolts, coalitions and invasions coalescing around such charismatic figures and their religio-political claims. Such immediate socio-political concerns are often more important than any deeper religious or theological issues in the long line of "theoretical" critiques of Sufi and related movements by Muslim scholars working in those contexts (including contemporary Islamic states). The constant reminders in such polemic theoretical works (whether for or against "mystical" tenets) of the public dangers of antinomianism and millenarianism are typically more concerned with the potential socio-political consequences of such popular movements--and their potential impact on the urban elite of scholars and merchants--than with the more profound individual spiritual dangers that are highlighted in practical spiritual works intended for mystics and Sufis themselves.

mystical writing is the immense summa of Ibn 'Arabi's "Meccan Illuminations",⁵³ which discusses in endless detail the deeper spiritual meanings contained within all the scriptural sources and later religious (or even secular) elaborations of Islamic tradition. That work's persuasiveness and comprehensiveness eventually won its author the honorific title of "the Greatest Teacher" (al-shaykh al-akbar), and made it a primary source for most later Islamic writings of this sort--as well as for some of the more openly universalist philosophic expositions in the fourth category below.

-- A third, very broad category would include actual intellectual or symbolic explanations of various dimensions of spiritual experience and their epistemological and ontological underpinnings, growing directly out of the need to understand and communicate the recurrent realities of the spiritual Path. An immensely complex creative effort of reflection in this direction already underlies the elaboration of the profuse technical vocabularies of even the earliest generations of Sufi teachers and comparable Shiite figures.⁵⁴ But it is typical of the wider social expression and essentially practical orientation of Islamic mysticism that the pursuit of any purely theoretical inquiry in these fields seems to have been reined in early on by a strong sense of the spiritual and social pitfalls of such intellectual activity pursued as an end in itself. Instead, one more typically finds such topics dealt with indirectly in the more "practical" types of

⁵³The growing number of translated sources available in English include the two anthologies from the Meccan Illuminations already cited at n. 47 above (including extensive bibliographies) and *The Bezels of Wisdom* (tr. R.W.J. Austin; New York, 1980). Ghazâlî's still widely read *Ihyâ' cUlûm al-Din* falls somewhere near the boundary between this type of writing and the preceding category, although it is even more directed more toward the spiritual dimensions of popular religious practice (in all of the above-mentioned categories) than to theoretical proof or persuasion. (The growing body of partial translations of that influential work are mentioned in R.J. McCarthy's annotated bibliography in the volume cited in n. 58.)

⁵⁴In English, see Massignon's work on al-Hallâj cited at n. 52, and G. Bowering's *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'ânic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustarî* (d. 283/896) (Berlin/New York, 1980). The most important other works in this category are in German, French and Arabic. The fundamental historical contributions of early Shiite esotericism (especially Ja'far al-Sâdiq) in this area have been much less explored--partly because the earliest Shiite hadîth sources pose a variety of problems for modern Shiite Usûlî clergy. For illustrations of this category of mystical writing in a Shiite setting, see H. Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 109-170, for extended translations from much later Shiite sources (often influenced by Sufism), within a fairly limited domain.

mystical writing discussed above⁵⁵ Any boundary between these two aims and audiences would be very difficult to draw, especially where the works in question are not in learned Arabic: many famous works touching on these subjects are in Persian or other Eastern Islamic languages and clearly intended for practical use by Sufis and other spiritually-inclined Muslim readers. In terms of refined allusions to classical scriptural symbols or spiritually revealing anecdotes: in such works the pure theoretical impulse is constantly turned back toward what is instead portrayed as its proper, comprehensive human context of spiritual realization.

-- Finally, there are those theoretical works whose authors have attempted more comprehensive, openly universal philosophic accounts, in both ontological and epistemological terms, of the central insights and related practices of one or more forms of Islamic "mysticism".⁵⁵ Those monumental philosophic achievements--associated with such celebrated and diverse thinkers as Avicenna, Suhrawardî, Ibn Sab'în, Mullâ Sadrâ and the many commentators of Ibn 'Arabî--became widely studied by intellectuals during later periods of Islamic history, especially within the complex multi-cultural, multi-confessional socio-religious worlds of the Mogul and Ottoman empires, with their significant resemblances (at least at the elite level) to our own world-cultural situation today.⁵⁶ But one cannot too strongly emphasize that even those more

⁵⁵In earlier periods works of this category were apparently attempted in an assortment of gnostic, hermetic and Neoplatonic vocabularies drawn from earlier traditions. After Avicenna, Muslim authors--including such key mystical writers as Suhrawardî, Ghazâlî and Ibn 'Arabî--almost always used versions of his creative combination of Aristotelean terminology, Ptolemaic cosmology, and kalâm theological vocabulary to express their own insights. For Avicenna's own role and motivations in this wider historical development, see our discussion of "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1991). J. Michot's study of *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'âd) et l'imagination*, (Louvain, 1987) provides extensive translations from the later Islamic mystical philosophers inspired by Avicenna.

⁵⁶For Suhrawardî, see the forthcoming translation of his *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Hikmat al-Ishrâq*) by J. Walbridge and H. Ziai. For the Shiite mystical philosopher Mullâ Sadrâ, see our study of *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mullâ Sadrâ* (Princeton, 1981). For Ibn 'Arabî and his interpreters and their far-reaching influences on the Islamic humanities throughout the Muslim world, see the translations and historical surveys cited at notes 40, 44 and 47 above. An illuminating (if somewhat diffuse) portrait of the diverse social and intellectual movements related to all of these figures within the religious world of Mogul India can be found in S.A.A. Rizvi's *Shâh Walî-Allâh and His Times* (Canberra, 1983); for their influence in Malaysia and Indonesia, see the numerous works of S.N. al-Attas on Hamza al-Fansûrî and the Malay Islamic humanities, including the books cited at n. 46 above.

original theoretical explorations were ordinarily not conceived of as opening a privileged form of intellectual access to mystical or spiritual realization, nor indeed even as being necessary for such realization by themselves. For in most cases such writings presuppose the same wider practical contexts and methods of realization shared with the more popular expressions of Islamic spirituality. And indeed the most striking evidence of the ongoing cultural significance of the Islamic humanities, in both Arab and later Eastern contexts, is the fact that each of the authors of this theoretical type of Islamic mystical writing was obliged to turn to the alternative of more accessible popular forms of expression--whether Persian-language mystical tales and religious commentaries in the cases of Avicenna, Suhrawardî, and Mulla Sadra; or Arabic mystical poetry in the cases of Ibn ʿArabî and of Ibn Sabʿîn's disciples--in order to reach out and influence wider, more popular circles beyond the learned religious elites.

VII. Spiritual Teaching and the Limits of Writing

By now our outline of the various types of Islamic mystical writing should have highlighted several distinctive characteristics that carry across many of the above categories and are in fact peculiar to virtually all the written expressions of Islamic mysticism. First, the great majority of those writings, when viewed in their original cultural setting, turn out to have been consciously directed either toward specific religio-intellectual elites not necessarily involved in any special spiritual disciplines (in the case of many "theoretical" writings) or toward other Muslims who were only potential mystical "beginners"--i.e., not readers who were already actively engaged in spiritual disciplines under the guidance of a master. Secondly, a further distinctive sign of this situation is the widespread reluctance in Islamic mystical writings to speak in concrete detail about such fundamental practical dimensions of the spiritual Path as meditation, retreat, fasting, prayers, vigil, dream visions, and so forth. Finally, an even more striking characteristic (at least for modern Western readers) is the peculiar reluctance of these Islamic mystics to write in an openly personal manner about their concrete individual experiences and insights.⁵⁷ Instead Muslim mystical writers of virtually all times, places and

⁵⁷The rare partial exceptions to this rule, like Suhrawardî or Ibn ʿArabî, are all the more striking--and their exceptional personal openness is often related (as in these two instances) to such writers' unusual assertion of a particular divine "mission" differentiating their case from that of other Muslims. However, there is certainly no lack of "individuality" in this mystical

literary genres typically prefer to allude to those more personal dimensions of their experience through archetypal symbols drawn from scriptural and other traditional sources. An unfortunate consequence of these recurrent features of reticence and discretion, for students of religion unfamiliar with their deeper social and practical contexts, is that initial acquaintance with the literature of Islamic mysticism may give a quite misleading impression of repetitiveness, relative (intellectual) superficiality or simplification, and even conventionality.⁵⁸

In fact, each of these particular literary characteristics (like their close parallels in the other artistic expressions of the Islamic humanities) can only be understood in terms of the ways such writings were intended to operate in their original social and cultural contexts. These mystical texts are only the most visible aspects of a wider assumption of "esotericism" rooted in three foundational features of Islamic religious culture (both popular and elite) already cited at the beginning of this essay. The first of these is the remarkable centrality of "mystical" aims and practices in the Qur'ân, where the spiritual life is portrayed as the primordial essence of Religion (Dîn, the universal God-soul relationship), combined with the (apparently utopian) insistence that those spiritual realities be explicitly expressed and realized in the everyday lives of all

literature: instead the aesthetic ideal here, as in many other fields of Islamic art, was to express one's individual experiences through highly nuanced allusions to a vast repertoire of scriptural and legendary archetypes and symbols conveyed by the local Islamic humanities. See the illustrations of this convention of the high-cultural Islamic humanities in our discussions of Mulla Sadra's "spiritual autobiography", in the study cited in the preceding note, and in S. F. Dale's "Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zâhir al-Dîn Muhammad Bâbur, 1483-1530", pp. 37-58 in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22 (1990). This particular way of expressing individuality, which finds its most subtle expressions in the later, highly stylized traditions of Islamic mystical poetry in India, Turkey and Iran, assuming an extraordinarily sophisticated and aesthetically alert audience, is gravely misrepresented in the influential discussions by G. von Grunebaum in *Medieval Islam* (Chicago, 1953). See the recent discussion of a "counter-example" that helps highlight these distinctive conventions of the high-cultural Islamic humanities,

⁵⁸It is likewise no coincidence if initial encounters with the central Islamic arts and humanities more generally--e.g., calligraphy, poetry, both learned and popular religious music, carpets, architecture, etc.--sometimes lead to similar reactions. In addition to the obvious unfamiliarity of much of their symbolism and religious references, those creations typically presuppose a common aesthetic and metaphysical outlook in their audiences--centering on the theophanic re-creation of shared spiritual archetypes--and the practical social contexts in which their explicitly contemplative functions could actually be realized. See the remarkably sensitive illustration of these essential points in W. Andrews' *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle, 1985).

people of faith, following the Prophet's own example. The second key feature is the constant focus, beginning already with the archetypal cases of Muhammad and the other prophets (and of the Imams, for Shiites), on the practically decisive need for a living divine-human connection and exemplar (i.e., the *walî* or "Friend of God" in the broadest sense, whether in this world or accessible spiritually) who can properly guide each Muslim's specific realization of those broad Qur'anic injunctions. And the third essential point, discussed at some length above, is the profound integration of virtually all expressions of Islamic "mysticism" within the Islamic humanities and the surrounding local forms of popular religion.

Integration, however, is not the same as identity. And the outward "invisibility" of the Friend of God described in the famous hadîth with which we began beautifully expresses the inner paradoxes and tensions--and the profound limits of any writing--inherent in the distinctively "esoteric" context of spiritual teaching assumed by most forms of Islamic mysticism. For from that perspective the ultimate purpose of mystical writing, as of all the associated spiritual methods, conditions and ways of life, was rarely conceived or presented as a particular new set of beliefs or social practices that could somehow be stated or applied "literally" and unambiguously.⁵⁹ Instead, within the Qur'anic framework and its ongoing socio-cultural expressions (including all the related Islamic humanities), that aim could only be portrayed as a transformed insight or realization of existing, publicly accessible doctrines, norms and forms of experience--and as a transformation in principle (or degree) potentially accessible to all.⁶⁰ Hence both the tenacious (and in the long run generally successful) resistance to any

⁵⁹The closest approaches to such an exclusivist attitude (both intellectually and socially), in some forms of Shiism from early centuries down to the present, inevitably led to the "sectarian" social consequences largely limited to Shiite groups in Islam--consequences which are not at all typical of the most influential forms of Islamic mysticism. And even within later Shiite sectarian communities, "mystics" or esotericists typically formulated their teachings and pursued their practical activities in ways closely paralleling the situation of mystics working within wider Sunni settings.

⁶⁰The resulting social and institutional fluidity of "mystics" and Sufis in most periods, with their profusion of orders, paths, and competing local shaykhs, has more typically resembled the indeterminate, constantly evolving relationship of contemporary "Twelve-step" spiritual programs to their surrounding American and European communities more than it has any rigid institutional models drawn from the later periods of Christian or Buddhist monasticism. Again and again, as already discussed at n. 5 above, one can observe in Islamic history the recurrent pattern of an almost automatic religious discrediting of those spiritual movements which took on

widespread institutionalization of religiously separate, exclusivist mystical sects or distinct sub-religions within the wider Islamic community,⁶¹ and the equally typical persistence of Muslim mystics' attempts to share their theoretical and practical spiritual insights (especially by means of the Islamic humanities) in forms ultimately accessible in some degree to all members of the wider Muslim community.

The second profound limitation on mystical writing, whose wider importance has already been discussed, was the almost universal assumption that the spiritual goal set forth by the Qur'ân could only be fully realized within the context of ongoing personal association between each disciple and an accomplished master (whether on earth or accessible spiritually, including all the prophets).⁶² As suggested by the frequent recourse to images drawn from alchemy, that essential spiritual process was not seen as involving the "concealment" of anything that could be communicated unambiguously to all comers. For virtually all Islamic mystics, it is precisely the true understanding of the scriptural symbols (and not those images themselves) that is "esoteric". From their perspective, the sacred texts themselves convey the Truth quite literally--so it is the disciple who must be gradually transformed, through the guidance and teaching of a master, in

the accoutrements of "successful" political, social, or economic institutionalization in ways that would thereby cut them off from the rest of the local Muslim community.

⁶¹Even the widespread Sufi tariqas of the 13th-19th centuries and their modern survivals have rarely been constituted as separate sects or "orders" in the institutional sense familiar, for example, in Catholicism. Instead they are typically voluntary associations (whose members remain immersed in the daily life of the surrounding Muslim community), local in their membership, surrounding a particular local leader, and more often than not dissolving or splitting up at the death of each locally accepted guide. Frequently they are in active competition with a range of similar local groups, with considerable movement from one guide to another; meetings may be held in homes or neighborhood mosques, with no special institutional locale required. In revealing contrast, the undoubtedly sectarian organization of Shiite groups in many Islamic contexts has usually occurred under very particular situations of extreme political hostility and persecution--situations which have normally had nothing to do with any particularly "mystical" activities or tendencies.

⁶²Of course this does not rule out certain extremely rare cases of individuals claiming to have reached spiritual enlightenment through direct divine intervention (the majdhûb)--e.g., as was claimed in various ways by Ibn ʿArabî and his famous 19th-century Algerian follower, ʿAbd al-Qâdir. But it is revealing that even these exceptional individuals, before undertaking to teach others, first consciously undertook to pass through the "normal" stages of the spiritual path under the guidance of other masters: see M. Chodkiewicz, *Emir Abd el-Kader: Ecrits spirituels* (Paris,

order eventually to grasp that literal sense,⁶³ to rediscover the essential connections between the sacred symbols and the corresponding realities and consequences in his or her own experience.

And finally, the fundamental principle underlying both of the above points and all their practical and literary consequences was Muslim mystics' characteristic awareness of the irreducible hierarchy of human spiritual capacities and predispositions (at least at any given moment), and their corresponding perception of the Qur'ân and hadîth as being carefully and appropriately addressed to this full, incontrovertible range of human types and possibilities. In this situation only a genuine master, it was assumed, could properly judge the readiness and aptitude of each individual student with regard to the relevant aspects of their character and spiritual development.

Now the above points, presented in this fashion, might seem abstract and even--for those without firsthand contact with the spiritual traditions in question--a sort of relic from another age.⁶⁴ But already at the purely textual level, even the most sceptical readers can begin to appreciate the importance and actual functioning of these integral relationships between "mystical" text, master, and spiritual practice in the Islamic context by focusing in on two subjects--indeed two inescapable "mysteries"--whose practical existential importance, within any religious tradition, is as self-evident as their prominent position in Qur'ânic teaching. In both of these cases, inquisitive readers can begin to appreciate more fully what is ordinarily not stated in

1982) and *Le Sceau des saints* (Paris, 1986), and the longer biography by C. Addas, *Ibn ʿArabî ou la quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris, 1989).

⁶³This typical attitude of Islamic spirituality--which is sufficiently contrary to models carried over from other religious contexts that it has frequently led to serious misunderstandings--obviously reflects the overt and irreducibly symbolic and musical character of the Qur'ânic text, which so often pointedly defies any translation or "obvious" understanding. Perhaps even more important for the predominance of this particular structure of writing and oral teaching in Islam is the repeated insistence, throughout the Qur'ân and in dozens of hadîth constantly cited by Sufis and other Muslims, that the prophets (awliyâ', Imams, etc.) and angels are here now, and that most people are simply unconscious of their spiritual presence (as of the ever-present "unseen world", al-ghayb, more generally).

⁶⁴See the timely autobiographical illustrations of these points, within a contemporary Turkish Sufi order, in Part I of L. Hixon's *Heart of the Qur'ân* (Wheaton, IL, 1988). For all its sketchiness, that firsthand account reveals far more about the typical functioning of the above principles than most of the translated Sufi literature cited above. For similar contemporary

Islamic mystical texts, and the possible reasons why certain matters are only discussed orally within the context of actual spiritual guidance and disciplines, simply by considering the alternative conceptions and possibilities more openly discussed in other religious traditions.

The first of those two subjects is the deeper grounds of the interplay between individual spiritual capacities and advancement (and eventually the very meaning of divine "Justice") and the ultimate consequences of each individual's actions in the "other world". In the Islamic context the meaning (and relative human importance) of this reality is conveyed by the detailed, remarkably complex eschatological symbolism which is probably the single most frequent subject of the Qur'ân. The second recurrent subject is that of the "spiritual hierarchy": of the deeper relationship between the timeless spiritual realities of the divine intermediaries discussed repeatedly in the Qur'ân and hadîth (prophets, angels, saints, etc.) and their particular earthly manifestations both in history and as those figures are encountered more directly by each individual in the course of their spiritual itinerary.

Even a passing acquaintance with the treatment of these issues history of religions, whether in Islamic or other contexts, should be sufficient to suggest some of the ethical, social and political reasons for the persistent refusal of even the greatest and most respected Islamic mystics to write more openly than the Qur'ân, or to speak more publicly than the Prophet, concerning these two central spiritual mysteries.

VIII. The Invisibility of the Saints

Whatever one's spiritual outlook and interests, the points we have outlined concerning the inner relations between Islamic mystical writings and the wider Islamic humanities, and their particular social manifestations within each Muslim community, are neglected, yet historically decisive phenomena that should be of the utmost interest to serious students of Islamic history, culture, religion and society. Like the "invisibility" of the Friends of God described in the celebrated hadîth with which we began, the very unfamiliarity of those perspectives to our own ways of thinking and viewing the world should at least suggest the possibility of realities, or at least new angles of vision, yet to be discovered.

illustrations of the processes of oral teaching in more traditional Islamic settings in Senegal, Algeria and Iran, see the translations cited at n. 36 above.

A striking illustration of that possibility is provided by two short works by the great Muslim mystic Ibn ʿArabî which have been partially translated under the title *Sufis of Andalusia*.⁶⁵ They give one cautionary lesson with regard to the highly problematic relations between texts (of any sort) and the available portrayals of Islamic history and religion. Among the surviving monuments and literary records of Muslim Spain in the late 12th century (apart from Ibn ʿArabî's own voluminous writings), there is very little in the Arabic poetry, political chronicles,⁶⁶ biographies of learned legal and religious scholars, or the celebrated works of a philosopher like Averroes, to suggest any particular social significance, or indeed even much conscious awareness, of what later came to be viewed as "Sufism". Islamic "mysticism," in that later, more institutionalized and self-consciously distinctive sense, is in fact almost invisible in the writings of those learned and privileged elites. Yet Ibn ʿArabî recounts in the most moving terms his own decisive personal encounters, over a few years of his youth, with dozens of men and women, from every region and walk of life, learned and illiterate, outwardly "religious" and less obviously so, whose extraordinary spiritual powers and influences were exercised almost

⁶⁵Tr. R.W.J. Austin, Oxford, 1971. For a more detailed analysis of the spiritual and personal significance, and the social-historical background, of those encounters, see the two pioneering French studies cited at n. 62 above (both forthcoming in English translation by the Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge).

⁶⁶ Except for mention of some scattered popular rebellions connected with individuals who may also have been Sufi leaders, the recurrent problems--for the student of Islamic religion--posed by that (understandable) focus of historical texts have been mentioned at n. 18 above. Ibn al-'Arif (trans. William Elliot and A.R. Abdullah), *Mahâsin al-Majâlis: The attraction of mystical sessions*. (London, Avebury, 1980)

entirely within the web of "ordinary" social and religious life and practice, visible in many instances only to those few specially motivated individuals who cared to seek them out.

The broader historical lessons that can be drawn from this telling example must surely be kept in mind when reading about any aspect of Islamic religion or culture. As for Ibn ʿArabî, he was making a different point.⁶⁷

⁶⁷See the remarkable contemporary illustration of that point--as of so many other central teachings of the Islamic humanities--in Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987: distributed in English and French as "Wings of Desire").

Place to insert '*Ibn 'Arabī and His Interpreters*' (JAOS-86/87) after scanning completed...

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Theophany or "Pantheism"?: the Importance of Balyânî's *Risâlat al-Ahadîya*.

The impact of books has little to do with their size. The first Western translation of a work attributed to Ibn 'Arabi, T.H. Weir's "*Whoso Knoweth Himself...*" (1901), was no more than a brief pamphlet,¹ and Michel Chodkiewicz' study of that same text, now correctly identified as Awhad al-dîn Balyânî's *Épître sur l'Unicité Absolue* (Paris, 1982), is still a short book. Yet it would be difficult to exaggerate the actual and potential significance of his study for bringing about a more adequate understanding of the true dimensions and contexts of Islamic spirituality, among both Western readers and younger, post-"traditional" generations in the new Islamic nation-states. Together with Professor Chodkiewicz' subsequent works on Ibn 'Arabî, this work has already contributed to bringing about a much-needed clarification and rectification of earlier widespread misunderstandings of "Sufism," of the teachings of Ibn 'Arabî, and of the purportedly "monistic" or "pantheistic" character of his doctrines and their ongoing reflection in the many movements of later Islamic thought and spirituality which remain inseparable from the wide-ranging influences of the "greatest Master," *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*.

In order to appreciate the surprisingly far-reaching importance of M. Chodkiewicz' remarks on this brief treatise, we must first explain the wider significance of the early translations of this *Risâlat al-Ahadîya*--and especially of their repeated mis-attribution to "Ibn 'Arabi"--in first mirroring, and then eventually helping to shape, both popular and more scholarly Western conceptions of Islamic spirituality from their first appearance at least on into the 1970's. The detailed history of the formation of these distinctive modern Western notions of "Sufism" and "Islamic mysticism" remains to be written, but there is no doubt that those nascent cultural

¹Originally published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1901, pp. 809-825; now available in a separate paperback reprint under the above-mentioned title (Beshara Publications, 1988). The subsequent Italian and French translations (1907 and 1910) by 'Abd al-Hâdî (Ivan Agueli) are discussed in more detail at the beginning of M. Chodkiewicz' study.

stereotypes were already marked, even before the appearance of Weir's and 'Abd al-Hâdî's translations, by at least the following distinctive features:²

1. The assumption that these matters ("Sufism" or "Islamic mysticism," etc.) were essentially *intellectual, theoretical, or doctrinal teachings* that could be formulated and communicated, by literary or other means, without further reference to the practical dimension of spiritual "realization" (Ibn 'Arabî's *tahqîq*) and the host of very concrete questions, both individual and cultural, that are inevitably raised when one enters that dimension.
2. The assumption of a vaguely "pantheistic"--or at the very least, "immanentist"--focus on the locus and forms of awareness of the ultimate reality, usually seen (at least in the prevalent Anglo-Saxon conceptions)³ as reflecting a radically "individualistic," personalistic perspective explicitly divorced from any essential social and cultural ties with ritual, authority, tradition, practice and the like.
3. The assumption that the teaching or "wisdom" in question was essentially "universal"--or alternatively, vaguely "Eastern," "Oriental," "perennial," etc.--in such a way as to preclude any need for further reference to specific religious and cultural traditions, with their own concrete practical and intellectual demands.

While the *Risâlat al-Ahadîya* did not by itself create those basic pre-conceptions--and especially the wider cultural notions of "mysticism" within which the initial non-specialist images of Islamic spirituality in the West were almost inevitably embedded--, its long tenure as the only

²One has the initial impression that each of these stereotypes was more sharply developed in the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic evolution of these conceptions than in France--due both to the vagaries of radically differing colonial and missionary contacts, and to the equally differing receptivities of predominantly Protestant and Catholic intellectual settings--but the exploration of these significant differences, as well as the larger process of discovery-cum-creation of images of Islamic spirituality, must be reserved for another time.

³It is important to note that the great majority of the preceding English translations of Islamic spiritual texts, whether from Persian or Arabic (or Malay, Hindi, etc.), were guided by sources and traditions rooted in the Eastern Islamic world, especially South Asia, rather than the Ottoman/Arab realms and contacts long reflected in French Islamic scholarship.

completely translated and widely-available⁴ work attributed to Ibn 'Arabi in the West certainly helped to cement and support those stereotypes. Even a cursory reading of that text--or of Jâmî's stories about Balyânî himself, as translated at the end of this article--will quickly make clear how accurately these broad conceptions are mirrored in this work and what we know of its (true) author's own life and teachings.

The second essential backdrop to the wider influence of M. Chodkiewicz' study has to do with an even broader and much more dramatic historical phenomenon: i.e., the ironic way that these recently created and historically quite anomalous Western stereotypes of "Sufism" and "Islamic mysticism"--and of the often mythical role attributed to Ibn 'Arabî in both--gradually came to be re-inserted into the ongoing polemical struggles of several generations of would-be "reformers" and "revolutionaries" seeking to shape and direct new nation-states and social realities throughout the Islamic world.⁵ Whatever their ideological stance (traversing the whole spectrum from Marxist to Islamist!), those nationalist political and social reformers have almost everywhere tended to share a common distaste for the "corruption," "decadence," and other defects they typically associate with these same mythical stereotypes of "Islamic mysticism," "popular religion," and with the intellectual and cultural traditions and accomplishments of (at least) the preceding six centuries of Islamicate civilization--not coincidentally, the period during

⁴While Nyberg's subsequent editions and commentary (1919) had a noticeable influence on later scholars writing on Ibn 'Arabi, they did not reach a wider public; and Asin-Palacios' pioneering works long remained either untranslated into other European languages or known mainly to specialists in non-Islamic fields (Dante studies, medieval history, etc.). The increasing availability in more recent decades of translations (T. Burckhardt, 1955) and then detailed studies (most notably, by H. Corbin and T. Izutsu) focusing on Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusûs al-Hikam* and its later Muslim philosophic commentaries did not in itself seriously call into question these same underlying pre-conceptions about Ibn 'Arabi and "Islamic mysticism."

⁵By discussing the anti-"monistic" polemics of Ibn Taymiyya and his earlier emulators in their actual historical contexts, throughout all of his writings on Ibn 'Arabî, Professor Chodkiewicz has helped to highlight the radically different nature and context of these modern polemics involving the name of Ibn 'Arabî, even when their language and themes are clearly drawn from earlier medieval discussions. Another of the particularly striking phases in this continually ironic process of cross-cultural "transmission" that M. Chodkiewicz has often highlighted in his notes to these studies is the remarkably far-reaching direct and indirect influence, throughout so many parts of the Islamic world, of the highly charged polemic images of Ibn 'Arabî and his "followers" (faithfully mirroring all the above-mentioned stereotypes) to be found throughout the writings of Louis Massignon.

which Ibn 'Arabî's actual influence became so widespread, at every level of religious teaching and expression, in Muslim cultures from Africa to China and Indonesia.⁶

Against this background, then, the essential contribution of Michel Chodkiewicz' work on Balyânî, as with each of his succeeding and increasingly detailed studies of Ibn 'Arabî himself, has been to undermine and radically "de-construct" these far-reaching mythologies that have come to be symbolically associated with the name of Ibn 'Arabî, in both East and West. He has done so, like an authentic *'âlim* in any culture, not by articulating some new, alternative mythology, but rather by conscientiously exploring and re-presenting the actual religious, cultural and historical contexts within which Ibn 'Arabî--and, in this case, Balyânî and the earlier Islamic figures who were his own inspiration, like Shushtarî and Ibn Sab'în--were actually writing and teaching. In the study of the *Risâlat al-Ahadîya*, in particular, Prof. Chodkiewicz began to develop three basic facets of that far-reaching effort of rectification and clarification which have been pursued in all his subsequent publications concerning the Shaykh.

The first of those facets, part of a much wider transformation in scholarship on Islamic subjects, has been to re-situate the "theoretical" writings and doctrines of figures such as Ibn 'Arabî (or Balyânî) within their original contexts, with all that implies for the relative weighting of religious, practical, literary, aesthetic and social dimensions that have typically been lost or forgotten when such texts came to be viewed only through a narrow philosophic, theological or political prism. The second key aspect of that scholarly effort, in some ways a subset of the first, has been to distinguish the actual teachings and writings of Ibn 'Arabî himself from the host of images and stereotypes with which his name has become associated--through the combined efforts of generations of "supporters" and detractors alike, in both Islamic and Western settings. One outstanding result of that effort, brilliantly illustrated in both of M. Chodkiewicz' subsequent books on Ibn 'Arabî, has been to restore appropriate emphasis to the absolutely central role of Islamic *scriptures* (Qur'an and hadith) and of spiritual *practice* throughout all of his writing and teaching, and specifically in his monumental *al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*.

⁶For the almost unimaginable extent of that ongoing historical influence, see the superb and densely allusive summary of the available research (by dozens of contemporary scholars) in M. Chodkiewicz' Introduction to *Un océan sans rivage: Ibn Arabi, le Livre et la Loi* (Paris, Seuil, 1992), now available in translation as *An Ocean Without Shore* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1993).

The third facet of this new approach, most strikingly illustrated already in this study of Balyânî, is that it has freed serious scholars and historians--too often distracted by the mythic dualisms of ideological polemics, past and present--to turn their attention to the *creativity* and *diversity* of Islamic religious and mystical *thought, practice* and *social expression* throughout the crucial formative period of the late 12th/6th to 14th/8th centuries. As we indicated at the beginning, this is potentially much more than a merely scholarly or academic contribution. Simply recognizing the very fact of this diversity and creativity, and bringing it to the attention of those obsessed by the polemics and ideological orthodoxies of our own time, can help to open doors that unfortunately are too often closed throughout much of the Islamic world today.

Indeed it may have been in this same spirit and with something of the same far-sighted intentions that the celebrated Persian poet and philosopher of Herat, 'Abd al-Rahmân Jâmî (d. 1492)--commentator on the *Fusûs al-Hikam* and devoted lifelong student of all of Ibn 'Arabî's work--mentioned Balyânî (d. 1287/686) in his famous hagiographic work, *Nafahât al-Uns*. The practical opposition so visible in each of these anecdotes between Balyânî's radical spiritual individualism ("antinomianism" would be almost an understatement) and the far more sober, consistently Sharia-based injunctions underlying virtually all of Ibn 'Arabî's practical spiritual teachings is at least as dramatic as any of the multitude of doctrinal contrasts and disagreements between these two figures that are highlighted in M. Chodkiewicz' telling notes to Balyânî's treatise. But instead of "censoring" Balyânî, either by openly censuring him or by simply leaving him out of his work (as he surely did with other Sufî figures), Jâmî seems to have delighted in drawing attention to the eccentricities of his character and method and, by implication, to their inner connections with his more theoretical teachings. Each reader is left to draw the appropriate conclusions....

JÂMÎ'S DESCRIPTION OF ABÛ ʿABDALLÂH BALYÂNÎ⁷

His surname was Awhad al-Dîn, and he was one of the descendants of Abû ʿAlî Daqqâq. Balyânî's lineage goes back to Abû ʿAlî as follows: (he was) the son of ʿAbdallâh, son of Masʿûd, son of Muhammad, son of ʿAlî, son of Ahmad, son of ʿUmar, son of Ismail, son of Abû ʿAlî Daqqâq--May God bless their innermost souls. Master Abû ʿAlî [Daqqâq] had one son, Ismâʿîl, and a daughter, Fâtima Bânû, who was married to Abû al-Qâsim al-Qushayrî.⁸

As for his chain of initiation, he took the *khirqâ*⁹ from his own father, Diyâ' al-Dîn Masʿûd, who is also known as "Imâm al-Dîn" Masʿûd. He received it from Shaykh Asîl al-Dîn Shîrâzî, [p. 259] who took it from Shaykh Rukn al-Dîn Sanjâsî, from Shaykh Qutb al-Dîn Abû al-Rashîd Abharî, from Shaykh Jamâl al-Dîn ʿAbd al-Samad Zanjânî, both of whom received it from Shaykh Abû al-Najîb Suhrawardî¹⁰--May God bless their innermost souls.

Balyânî said: "At the beginning (of my path) I sought to seclude myself from people, and I spent eleven years up on Mount Ligâm. When I came down from the mountain, I kept

⁷The actual author of the "Treatise on the (Divine) Unicity" (*Risâlat al-Ahadîya*) often attributed to Ibn ʿArabî, translated by T.H. Weir as "*Whoso Knoweth Himself...*". This text is the translation of his biographical notice in ʿAbd al-Rahmân Jâmî's (d. 1492) renowned Persian hagiographic dictionary, *Nafahât al-Uns* (Tehran, ed. M. Tawhîdîpûr, 1336 h.s./1957), pp. 258-262. For additional historical background on Balyânî's probable historical connections with the "monist" Sufi school of Ibn Sabʿîn and al-Shushtarî, drawn from discussions by Ibn Taymîya and other later sources, see M. Chodkiewicz' Introduction to his translation of Balyânî's *Epître sur l'Unicité Absolue* (Paris, les deux Océans, 1982), pp. 17-41.

⁸Daqqâq (d. 405/1014) and Qushayrî (d. 465/1074, author of the celebrated *Risâla*, perhaps the most widely read traditional Islamic work on the Sufi path) are two of the most important figures in the development of Sufism in Nishapur before the two Ghazâlîs. Annemarie Schimmel (*Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p. 427) mentions that Qushayrî's wife, Fâtima-Bânû, also became famous for her learning and knowledge of hadîth as well as her piety.

⁹The "patched garment" (in actual practice often simply a cap or other symbolic object) symbolizing the spiritual "poverty" of the Sufi, bestowed in the formal initiation ceremony connecting a novice with a particular chain of spiritual teaching (*silsila*) usually traced back to the Prophet.

¹⁰Died 563/1168, the influential founder of one of the oldest surviving Sufi orders, the Suhrawardîya, and author of an early Sufi "rule", the *Kitâb Adâb al-Murîdîn* (trans. M. Milson, *A Sufi Rule for Novices*, Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1975). He was an uncle of the equally famous Abû Hafâs Suhrawardî (d. 632/1234) mentioned by Balyânî later in this notice (n. 14). Most of the other shaykhs in this portion of Balyânî's *silsila* were influential enough to be mentioned elsewhere in Jâmî's work (e.g., al-Sanjâsî as master of the famous Persian poet and disciple of Ibn ʿArabî, Awhad al-Dîn Kirmânî, p. 588).

company with¹¹ the ascetic (*zâhid*) Abû Bakr Hamadânî. He was a man with spiritual powers and true spiritual insight.¹² His personal form of worship (*wird*) was always as follows: every night he got up and placed an iron rod under his chin, and remained standing (in prayer) until day. With his assent, I likewise stood behind him; from time to time he would look back and encourage me, saying (mockingly): "Go and lie down somewhere!" I would sit down on the ground while he was occupied with his own (spiritual) task, and after a while I'd get up again. I emulated him until the time when his spiritual state also descended on me; at that point I (again) chose solitude. Zâhid Abû Bakr was so very happy with me that he called me "Gypsy". I heard that one day he said: "'Gypsy' came and took something from me and carried it off; now I don't know where he went!"

After some time I went back to see him. "Where were you", he asked, "and what did you bring?" I modestly said nothing. After we'd sat together for an hour Zâhid asked me a question, in answer to which I responded that "I am not other than God." Zâhid said: "So you've brought the saying of Mansûr (al-Hallâj)?!"¹³ "With a single sigh that I make," I answered, "I can find a hundred thousand (God-intoxicated souls) like Mansûr!" As soon as I said that, Zâhid picked up his rod and threw it at me. I jumped aside, and that rod just missed me. Zâhid cursed me roundly and said: "They crucified Mansûr and *he* didn't run away, but you fled from this little stick!" "That's because Mansûr wasn't yet spiritually perfect (*tamâm*)," I replied, "or else he would have run away. For with God--May He be exalted and sanctified--all things are one." Once I'd said that, Zâhid said: "Maybe you've eaten some (psychedelic) plant?" "Yes indeed," I

¹¹This phrase loosely translates a key technical Sufi term (*suhbat*) referring to a person's regular, constant contact with a particular spiritual guide, in which they "learn" from all the actions and influences of the guide in question, not simply from formal teachings or specifically assigned disciplines. As can be seen from the remainder of Balyânî's story, it can sometimes be misleading to describe this often relatively informal process as a "master-disciple" relationship.

¹²*Karâmât*, or "spiritual powers" [literally "acts of (God's) grace"], refers to the supra-normal psychic and psychokinetic powers possessed by certain saints. *Firâsat*, or "spiritual insight", refers to the specific type of *karâma* involving the ability to "see" into the heart, mind and general spiritual state of another person; it is mentioned in a famous hadîth: "Beware the *firâsa* of the person of faith, for they see with the light of God!"

¹³I.e., *Anâ al-Haqq*, "I am God (the Truly Real)", the notorious "ecstatic saying" (*shath*) which--along with many other related acts and public teachings--eventually led to the celebrated voluntary martyrdom of al-Hallâj. (See the exhaustive four-volume study by L. Massignon [trans. H. Mason], *The Passion of al-Hallâj*, Princeton/Bollingen, 1982.)

replied: "I have eaten a plant, but from the meadows of Reality!" "You've eaten bliss and you've eaten well," he declared, "so come sit on the prayer-carpet and preserve that (through prayer)!"

Later Zâhid asked me: "What you said concerning Mansûr (al-Hallâj), that it was because of his (spiritual) imperfection that he didn't run away and was crucified--what is your reason for saying that?" "My reason," I replied, "is that if a rider who claims to know horsemanship [p. 260] doesn't let go of the reins when he gallops his horse; or if, when he does drop the reins, he's still able to restrain the horse, then such a person is rightfully called a skillful rider. But if he's not able to stop his horse, then he's said to be imperfect in horsemanship." After I'd said that, Zâhid agreed with me. "You spoke correctly," he said: "I've never seen anyone more perspicacious than you."

Balyânî also said: "They told me that one of the companions of Shaykh Shihâb al-Dîn [Abû Hafs °Umar] Suhrawardî¹⁴--May God sanctify his spirit--called Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn Buzghush¹⁵ had come to Shiraz. I was very happy at that, because I had already attained all of the (spiritual) stations and states of the Sufis about which I'd learned, and I was seeking (to discover) something more. Indeed my own father used to say: "Whatever I requested from God I gave to (my son) °Abdallâh; what (God) opened up for me like a little peephole, He opened up for (my son) like a wide-open gate." So I got up and traveled to Shiraz in order to meet Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn.

I told him quite a few things about my own spiritual states and stations and extraordinary experiences. He listened to everything very politely and didn't say anything in response. I sat there for an hour and then went outside, but suddenly I felt absolutely compelled to return. "Let's go back and see Shaykh Najîb al-Dîn," I thought to myself, "to find out what he says."

When I reached the door of his house, they told me: "He's in the inner (private) rooms. Go on in and sit down in that outer room where the shaykh usually sits (in public audience) until

¹⁴This celebrated and politically influential master (d. 632/1234; nephew of the Abû Najîb Suhrawardî mentioned at n. 10 above) was the author of the famous Sufi "handbook", °*Awârif al-Ma°arif*, and played a key role in spreading the chivalrous "*futuwwa*" movement initiated by one of the last Abbasid caliphs, al-Nâsir. (See A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 244ff.) His biography is on p. 472 of the *Nafahât*.

he comes back." Now when I sat down there, I noticed that just in front of his prayer-carpet was (a paper with) everything that I'd just told him written down on it. "Aha!" I thought to myself, "so the shaykh needed that so much he even wrote it down! Now I know what sort of fellow he is and to what lengths he'll go!" I immediately got up and went outside. But when I reached Kâzarûn¹⁶ I reproached myself, and I found a certain (spiritual) ambition (had returned) within me. I began a spiritual retreat (*khalvat*), and during that retreat God gave me whatever I asked Him for in (only) five days.

One day when he was in Shiraz, he went into the khânegâh of Shaykh Saʿdî.¹⁷ Shaykh Saʿdî took a handful of pennies and set them next to (Balyânî). "Say (a prayer over these)," he said, "so that we can give this blessed offering (to buy) a meal for the dervishes."¹⁸ "O Saʿdî," he replied, "(instead of) bringing out those pennies, go take that jar with the 62 silver coins you put in it, and use that for the dervishes' supper!" Shaykh Saʿdî immediately went and brought back the jar, just as [p. 261] he had said (and found the money in it).¹⁹ Then he sent it out and had a wonderful meal prepared for the dervishes.

The Shaykh had a disciple who was a cook; he sold soup in the bazaar. Whenever the Shaykh passed by that disciple's shop he would take a bowl of his soup and eat it right there,

¹⁵According to Jâmi's notice (pp. 473-474), this devoted disciple of Suhrâwardî returned to his native Shiraz (in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions?), established a flourishing khanegah there, and died in 678/1279.

¹⁶An important trading city about 70 miles west of Shiraz, on the traditional route to the gulf port of Bushahr, home of the important Kazaruni ("Murshidî", "Ishâqî") Sufi order founded in the early 11th century. (See the related articles in *EP*, vol. IV, 850-51, which mentions an Amîn al-Dîn Balyânî as "reviver" of that order in the 7th-8th/13th-14th century.)

¹⁷Presumably the celebrated Shirazi poet (d. 1292) and author of the *Gulistân* and *Bûstân*. However, it should be added that modern historians have tended to question the authenticity of many of the later stories about Saʿdî's life and travels drawn from his works, including Jâmi's own brief notice later in the *Nafahât*.

¹⁸It is not entirely clear from the context whether Saʿdî is simply asking Balyânî for his additional blessing on the money to be used for buying the meal, or whether instead it is understood--as in a similar anecdote told about a poor but respected saint by Ibn ʿArabî in his *Sufis of Andalusia*--that the pennies blessed by a famous saint will actually fetch a much higher price because of their protective, talismanic value.

¹⁹Again it is not clear whether the "miracle" (*karâma*) intended by the story is simply that Balyânî was supernaturally aware of the exact amount and location of money Saʿdî had once put away (and then forgotten?), or whether he was actually able to materialize that particular sum in that location. (Both sorts of supernatural phenomena are frequently mentioned in hagiographic works.)

standing up. One day he had a bowl of soup in his hands when a (would-be) dervish came up with great ceremony, dressed in a multi-colored Sufi robe,²⁰ and greeted him. "I would like for you," he said, "to point out for me the way to God. Please tell me what would be helpful for me to do so that I can act according to (your instructions)." The Shaykh handed him the bowl of soup he was holding in his hands and said: "Part of the foundation of your work is to take this and eat it." So the dervish took the soup and ate it, and when he was finished eating the Shaykh told him: "Now wipe off the soup that spilled on your hand on your Sufi robe, and do the same thing whenever you eat something." "But master," he said, "I can't do that! Can't you suggest something else for me to do!" "Since you aren't even able to do this much," the Shaykh said, "you wouldn't be able to do anything else I'd tell you to do either. Run along; you aren't cut out for this work!"

One of the Shaykh's disciples had sought out a secluded place on the mountain, when a poisonous snake came along. He tried to pick up the snake, but it bit him and his limbs became inflamed and swollen. The news of this reached the Shaykh and he sent a group of people to bring back the disciple. "Why did you pick up that snake," he asked the disciple, "so that he could bite you?" "But my master," the disciple replied, "*you yourself always said that there's nothing other than God!* I didn't view that snake as being other than God, and that's why I bravely picked it up." The Shaykh declared: "Whenever you see God in a terrifying form (*libâs-i qahr*), run away and don't go near Him! For if you don't act like that, He'll do exactly what happened to you just now!" After that he put his hand under the disciple's head and helped him to sit up and said: "From now on don't do anything so rash until you *know* that He²¹ is good." Then he said a prayer and blew on the disciple, and the swelling went away and he was cured.

²⁰By the 13th century, with the international spread of both organized Sufi orders (*tariqa*, pl. *turuq*) and wandering, mendicant dervishes throughout the Islamic world, their adherents in many regions had developed special robes, headgear and other distinctive apparatus (e.g., the *kashkûl* or beggar's bowl; different forms of prayer beads; the *tabarzîn* or two-headed hatchet; etc.) to distinguish their particular status and affiliation.

The *khirqâ hizâr-mikhî* ("thousand-nailed" *khirqâ*) mentioned here was no longer the poor beggar's cast-off rags, but a splendid, artistically sewn patchwork of hundreds of tiny strips of multi-colored material--an ostentatious sign of wealth and social pretense rather than of inner or outward poverty.

²¹Or "it": it is unclear whether the reference is to the manifestations of God--and especially the well-known distinction between the divine theophanies of Beauty (*jamâl*) and Majesty (*jalâl*)--or to the more mundane distinction between poisonous and harmless snakes.

He once said: "Being a real dervish²² isn't ritual prayer and fasting, and it isn't spending the night in prayerful vigil. All those things are (just) the accouterments of servanthood, while being a real dervish means suffering offense and affliction.²³ If you really attain that, you've arrived."

He also said: "Know God--but if you don't know God, then don't know yourself either! Because when you don't know yourself, *then* you come to know God."

Then he said: "I say that there's something even better than that [i.e., than knowing God]: *Be* God! But if you aren't God, then don't be yourself--because if you aren't yourself, then you are God."

One day he had gone on pilgrimage²⁴ to (the tomb-shrine of) Shaykh Rûzbihân Baqlî²⁵--May God bless his innermost self--and Shaykh Sadr al-Dîn Rûzbihân [p. 262] was seated at the head of his father's tomb. When Shaykh ʿAbdallâh (Balyânî) stood in front of Rûzbihân's tomb, Shaykh Sadr al-Dîn stood up out of respect for him, remained standing for a while, and then sat down. And again he stood up and remained standing for a while, but Shaykh ʿAbdallâh didn't even notice him! When (Balyânî) had finished his 'visit', Sadr al-Dîn said to him: "I've been standing up (in respect for you) all this time, and you didn't even notice me!" "Shaykh Rûzbihân had handed me a pomegranate," he replied, "and I was busy eating it with him."

²²Or simply "(spiritual) poverty": *darvîshî*, the Persian equivalent of the Arabic term *al-faqr*, glorified as the epitome of Muhammad's own spiritual path in the celebrated hadîth "Poverty is my pride", *al-faqr fakhrî*.

²³The Persian term here (*ranjîdan*) is probably used as an equivalent of the Arabic Sufi technical term *malâma*, or intentionally "drawing blame" upon oneself in order to avoid the forms of hypocrisy often accompanying the reputation of piety and the spiritual "insincerity" (and insecurity) often underlying an unusual reliance on acts of piety and devotion. From a very early period, the true *malâmâtîya*--accomplished mystics who carefully concealed their powers and accomplishments--were often considered the highest rank among the Sufis: see the references and discussion in A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, pp. 86-88, and R. Deladrière's recent translation of Sulamî's influential *R. al-Malâmâtîya, La Lucidité Implacable: Épître des Hommes du Blâme*, Paris, arléa, 1991.

²⁴*Ziyârat*, literally "visit": the technical term in many Islamic languages for the pilgrimages to the tombs or shrines of saints, Imams, prophets and the family and Companions of Muhammad which are a central feature of religious life in every part of the Islamic world.

²⁵One of the most celebrated of the many saints of Shiraz (d. 606/1209), whose works have been edited and translated by a number of modern Western scholars: see Jâmî, *Nafahât*, pp. 255-258, and A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, index s.v.

Among his poems is the following:

We're totally God, most absolutely:

We're not from fire, wind, water and earth!

We've become forever naked with regard to being

or not-being; our clothing is torn.

The Truth: you can't see any other than God,

for no doubt both worlds aren't other than Him!

We don't say the world is Him; nor (do we say)

that it's wrong to make that connection:

He isn't the world, nor is the world Him:

to see *all* as Him in this way is not mistaken.

And this quatrain:

Until I saw *Haqq* with my own two eyes every instant

I never stopped seeking with each breath.

They say God can't be seen with our own two eyes: so

they're like that, and I'm like *this* at every instant.

He passed away on the day of ʿAshûrâ,²⁶ in the year 686 [March 4, 1287]

²⁶The tenth day of the lunar month of Muharram; for Shiites the final day of mourning commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn (grandson of Muhammad and son of Alî and Fâtima) at Kerbala.

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The Continuing Relevance of Qaysari’s Thought: Divine Imagination and the Foundations of Natural Spirituality

...And were it not for God’s defending some of the people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques in which the Name of God is often remembered would surely have been destroyed. Certainly God helps whoever helps Him... (22:40)

The question I would like to speak about today is simple and straightforward. Why should people today, who are not specialists in the history of Islamic philosophy and theology, continue to be interested in the writings of Da’ud al-Qaysari (and by extension, in the Shaykh al-Akbar, Ibn ‘Arabi, who was his central subject and inspiration)? In a way, this is a question we are obliged to ask about any significant thinker, artist or religious thinker. And as I tell my own students whenever they are discovering such creators and thinkers for the first time, the real test of understanding the work and deeper intentions of such creative thinkers is “What would that person be doing or creating—that is, how would they be *communicating*—here and now, today, in our own culture and civilization?” After true understanding comes communication and transmission: anything less than that is idolatry and passing illusion.

My own experience with Da’ud al-Qaysari began in Iran more than two decades ago, working with Toshihiko Izutsu and Jalaloddin Ashtiyani, where I first encountered his remarkable accomplishments as a pedagogue and the foremost commentator of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Fusus al-Hikam. I quickly discovered that his was the most useful and exacting of the classical commentaries on the mysteries of the Fusus, and his famous Introduction (*Muqaddima*) to that

commentary was a masterful philosophic summary and persuasive elucidation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s spiritual insights and often poetic allusions. What was also clear in those celebrated works of Qaysari was the centrality of his personal creative focus on the divine/cosmic Imagination (*khayal*)—even if the deeper reasons for that emphasis of his were not so apparent to me at the time. Today, however, returning to view Qaysari in light of this international Symposium and its focus on him as an important historical actor and creator in his own right, I am struck by his wider significance as an activist, politically engaged and creative Islamic philosopher-theologian in a way that recalls the tradition of such classical Muslim philosophers as Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and Nasiruddin Tusi—even if the philosophic and theological positions Qaysari was “defending” (to recall the Qur’anic verse with which we began) were often radically different from the more worldly theses of those “Peripatetic” thinkers.

In short, it is my impression that the deeper, unifying reasons underlying Da’ud al-Qaysari’s writing and teaching are not really that different today than in his own time: that is, to defend and explain the common philosophic grounds of what the Qur’an repeatedly calls *Din al-Haqq*, *Din Allah*, or *ad-Din al-Qayyim*—the central Qur’anic postulate of a natural, universal human spirituality, and all the wide-ranging practical and political conclusions flowing from that—against a series of perennial limitations and dangerous misunderstandings. In terms drawn from within later Islamic tradition, we would say that the *‘irfan-e nazari* (the “theoretical spirituality”) of Qaysari and his fellows can best be understood as a prologue to—and a necessary defense and explanation of—the much wider realm of *‘irfan-e ‘amali*, of the multitudinous practical spiritual forms of the later Islamic humanities in all their creative richness and diversity. Qaysari’s writing, like his practical teaching and institution-building, was directed at the intellectual and religious elite of his day, at students who—having already

integrated the traditional Arabic religious sciences of Islam—would soon be called upon to guide, direct and arbitrate the many competing and often conflicting paths, methods and institutions that had come to flourish by that point in Islamic history. Against that practical and historical background, his philosophic work—building on Ibn ‘Arabi’s--can be seen to provide a comprehensive, over-arching “meta-theology” of Islamic faith and practice whose particular virtue was to leave some positive, even indispensable spiritual role for the full diversity of human spiritual types, and by extension for the full range of religious institutions, methods and practices which corresponded to that spectrum of unique needs and (potential) contributions. Although I do not have sufficient historical knowledge of that period to judge Qaysari’s indirect influence, through the ongoing work of his own students and disciples, one can at least hypothesize that such a remarkable breadth of vision and understanding, when translated into ongoing historical practice, had at least some part to play in the remarkable endurance and ongoing religious diversity of the Ottoman empire in subsequent centuries.

Now if we translate what was just said into contemporary terms, one could say that Qaysari is articulating a “*meta-philosophy of religions,*” an integrative, comprehensive understanding of the multiple dimensions of reality and of human nature which clearly recognizes both the common, universal aspects and the necessary diversity and specificities of each of the revealed world religions—a complex understanding which again remains grounded in a profound acquaintance with the realities and “ever-renewed creation” of actual spiritual life. Allowing for the change of historical circumstances, it is not difficult to extend the field of Qaysari’s thought from the competing Islamic sects, schools and tariqas of his own day, to their cognate forms of spiritual life in our own time. Indeed, for those historians who know how incredibly diverse and creative the Islamic humanities were in the centuries immediately

preceding Qaysari's work, one may even wonder whether the spectrum of religious and spiritual activity in our own time is actually any greater than it was in the Dar al-Islam of those earlier centuries.

In any event, the cornerstone of Qaysari's religious and philosophic thought is his articulation and defense of the key metaphysical and spiritual role of *Imagination* (*khayal*)—at once divine, cosmic, and as experienced by each human being—and the resulting necessary *individuality* of each and every soul's relation with the Divine. The practical, political implications of that insight highlight the indispensable spiritual role of each individual's inalienable *freedom* and *responsibility*, and of the far-reaching *diversity* and *creativity*—in every area of human activity--which are the natural consequences of acknowledging and supporting those dimensions of human being. In a word, the world of Imagination is ineluctably and profoundly *democratic*. In the universe of ever-renewed, always unique theophanies (*mazahir*), “Signs” (*ayat*), and divine “Presences,” that is elaborated in Qaysari's metaphysics, no phenomenon can be excluded or eliminated as somehow “other-than-God”: the very possibility of *tawhid*, of the One underlying all existence, demands this comprehensiveness. Within that context, the ongoing movement of each human soul from its initial basharic state to its realization and ultimate fulfillment as the theomorphic *Insan*, the polished mirror of all the divine Attributes and names—the path of spiritual perfection leading to true responsibility and “co-creativity” with God—requires the constant *freedom* to learn the inner reality of God's infinite creative Compassion (*rahma*, and all of the divine Attributes contained within that Name) through our own countless mistakes and through experiencing daily, on every plane, the educational consequences of our own mistakes.

From this perspective, as the Qur'an repeatedly insists, it is only through the recurrent, universal yet necessarily individual experience of spiritual *trials* or "tests" that human beings individually rediscover the central spiritual virtues of Islam and all the revealed religions: *'iman, taqwa, sabr, tawakkul, shukr* and all the other virtues epitomized in the lives of the prophets and the Friends of God (the *awliya'*). And as Qaysari has so clearly and comprehensively explained, the theater for all those trials—as for all the spiritual virtues and other inspirations that we only discover through them—is none other than the Imagination. For when one looks at the individual spiritual learning process of trial and purification more closely, it is readily apparent that it is necessarily and intrinsically universal for all human beings, not limited to any particular religion, culture or historical setting ; secondly, that this process is artfully and masterfully controlled and articulated by God—hence the central Qur'anic themes of Destiny, Providence, Grace and acknowledgment of the divine Lordship—in all-pervasive, transcendent ways that (at first appearance) relentlessly dwarf all our human efforts of manipulation and control, until we learn to sail with the Spirit's wind; and finally, that this process takes place on the stage of soul and spirit, in that infinite expanse Qaysari and his fellows called the divine "Imagination" (*khayal*)....

Now at this point those who are not philosophers or metaphysicians by training might understandably—and truthfully--object that these central concerns of Qaysari's thought do not seem all that original or controversial, that they are simply rephrasing and elaborating insights and assumptions that are at the very heart of the Qur'an and other revealed teachings. I would certainly agree. But what such an objection does highlight is in fact the essentially political and theological nature of Qaysari's work, as one sort of necessary "defense" of the spiritual life and its political preconditions alluded to in the famous Qur'anic verse with which we began. Those

wider political dimensions of Qaysari's work only appear clearly when they are contrasted with the perennial use (or abuse) of religious symbols—all over the world, and at every time that we know of—as vehicles for various political and social ends, for the construction of ethical and communal orders, where those symbols quickly become reduced to expressions of the basharic passions of anger, fear, resentment, envy and despair. There should be no need here to catalogue the recurrent forms and destructive consequences of this perennial reduction of religion to limited political and passionate ends, in Qaysari's day or in our own time.

Against that background, we can perhaps see more clearly that the practical consequence of Qaysari's focus on the realm of Imagination and its central, inalienable role in spiritual life was to highlight the existence of a truly *universal common ground* for spiritual growth and understanding and creativity: a common ground rooted in the most intimate individual domains of experience, trials, mysteries and revelations--in what the Irish poet W.B. Yeats called "the rag-and-bone shop of the Heart." The essential political consequence of that emphasis—among the most educated and influential 'ulama' of Qaysari's day—was to *defend* the diverse aesthetic, social, religious and political expressions of that insight in the Islamic civilization of his time, from the masterpieces of the Islamic humanities developed by poets like Rumi and Yunus Emre, to the multitude of spiritual paths and methods pioneered by saints both celebrated and unknown—and beyond all of those visible historical forms, to turn his readers' attention toward the multitude of deeper, invisible forms of spiritual influence and attraction that continue to work on and through each of our souls. In even broader terms, all of Qaysari's thought can be seen as a vision of that universal Reality the Qur'an calls the "Religion of Truth" (*Din al-Haqq/al-Din al-Qayyim*) as the common ground of reality and experience underlying all the historically created and structured "religions of man."

It is precisely at the level of this comprehensive vision, I would suggest, that Qaysari's thought continues to be a compelling and valuable contribution for people all over the world today. For in the rapidly shrinking world we all inhabit, more and more "ordinary people"—not just a handful of philosophers and theologians—are daily forced to grapple with the perennial practical and political dilemmas of religious diversity and self-conscious spiritual direction. The media and their manipulators, from every direction, are only too happy to highlight the all too prominent signs of religious confusion, division, deception and strife—or to publicize "solutions" that are even more short-lived and illusory. Against that background, Qaysari's vision of the divine Imagination and its infinite human reflections—if we choose to put that vision into practice—can lead us toward an understanding of ever-deeper levels of awareness and unity, toward an awareness of the diversity of religious symbols *as symbols* (*amthal/ayat*) growing out of different life-worlds and cultural and historical traditions, but pointing to deeper underlying realities and divine intentions. If we take his vision seriously, we discover that human beings are profoundly united—beyond all the separations of time and space and culture—by the common tasks of (co-) creation and *com*-munication, and by the common political and social challenges of developing the conditions that will make that creation and communication possible.

In other words, if we take seriously the centrality of Imagination as articulated in Qaysari's thought, then we can see also see happening everywhere around us the compelling and heartening vision described in Sura 110:

“...When there comes the victorious-support of God and the Opening, and you see the people entering into the Religion of God in waves, then sing forth the praise of your Protecting-Lord and seek His forgiveness: surely He is ever-Returning.”

La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'âd) et l'imagination. By JEAN MICHOT. Pp. xlvii + 237. Louvain: PEETERS. 1987.

It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the writings of Avicenna (d. 428/1037) have played a central role, for almost a thousand years, in virtually all subsequent schools and currents of Islamic thought--a role quite comparable, in the diversity and extent of their influence, to that of the works of Plato and Aristotle in the West.¹ Thus such outwardly disparate (and usually conflicting) intellectual traditions as post-Ghazalian kalam and its logical auxiliaries (typified by Fakhr al-Din Razi); the various attempts to formulate a speculative or "theoretical" framework for Islamic mysticism (e.g., Suhrawardi, Ibn Sab'in, the "Avicennizing" commentators of Ibn 'Arabi, and Mulla Sadra Shirazi); and the self-styled "Peripatetic" school developed by Nasir al-Din Tusi and others all drew much of their conceptual apparatus and systematic expression--if not always their more original inspiration and distinctive intentions--from the works of the "leading Master" (al-Shaykh al-Ra'is).² In addition, Avicenna's cosmological, psychological and metaphysical notions, in their more widespread popular adaptations, offered a coherent and systematic world-view which provided a convenient "scientific" (and at the same time religiously orthodox) background and persuasive explanation for many less intellectual forms of mysticism and popular devotion, so that Sufi poetry and literature of the time, in Persian and other languages, are seldom entirely comprehensible without some reference to those conceptions. Yet if scholarly students of these traditions have long been aware of these facts, even the broadest historical outlines of these centuries of Islamic philosophic thought have not yet been adequately reflected in the secondary and synthetic accounts available in the West.

In this context, Prof. Michot's long-awaited study, quite apart from its more specialized contributions, should provide a greatly needed comprehensive introduction to the Avicennan features of all those later Islamic traditions--and more particularly, to the more popular

¹If something similar could also be said of the historical influences of Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi, one must likewise take into account the substantial, although seldom explicitly acknowledged, role of "Avicennan" themes and perspectives throughout the writings of both of those later thinkers.

²The scathing and systematic critiques of Avicennan conceptions by both Averroes and Ibn Taymiya, which clearly delimit the opposing intellectual boundaries of his influence, only serve to underline the widespread degree of respect for his work (however understood) in their respective milieus;

theological and mystical uses of his work--as well as indispensable background for interested students (whether of philosophy, history or literature) lacking more direct access to the sources in question.³ The wider accessibility and usefulness of this book for that purpose are greatly enhanced, to begin with, by the author's inclusion, in some 700 notes (roughly a third of the volume), of lengthy translations (usually in French, but occasionally in Latin and Italian) of most of the key passages under discussion, as well as his long, carefully annotated bibliography (35 pp.) covering the dozens of Avicennan texts and translations cited here.⁴ Secondly, the approach adopted here provides the uninitiated reader with a clear and detailed idea of the full interdependence of each of the elements (ontology, cosmology, epistemology, psychology, celestial physics, etc.) in Avicenna's philosophic system--essential interconnections which are often dealt with only tangentially in those related classic studies of more specific elements of his thought (by Pines, Gardet, Corbin, Rahman, Goichon, etc.) which are integrated and recapitulated here. This particular aspect of Prof. Michot's approach is especially helpful in bringing out the potential--if not always unambiguous!--systematic importance of Islamic theological issues and "heavenly" elements (i.e., in the conception of celestial souls, intellects, etc. and their relations to the sublunar world) that modern readers or those approaching Avicenna

and it is worth noting that the tendencies represented by both those critics remained a distinctly minority view (at least in intellectual circles) until a relatively recent time.

³For this purpose, Prof. Michot's book is perfectly complemented by the almost simultaneous publication, in a single massive volume (nearly 700 pages), of Henry Corbin's translations of the metaphysical section of Suhrawardi's mystical and Neoplatonic *Hikmat al-Ishraq* (6th/12th century), the more "Peripatetic" commentary of Qutb al-Din Shirazi (7th/13th c.), and the super-commentary (actually a relatively independent work constituting a sort of dialectical history of earlier Islamic and Greek philosophy) by Mulla Sadra (11th/17th c.)--a volume whose contents are almost entirely devoted to the same issues and historical developments. [SOHRAVARDI. *Le livre de la sagesse orientale*. Paris: VERDIER. 1987. Ed. C. Jambet.] Taken together, these two volumes offer a remarkable in-depth introduction to many of the central issues--and competing philosophic tendencies--in several major traditions of later Islamic thought.

⁴Even scholars with ready access to the standard, but somewhat outdated bibliographical studies by Anawati and Mahdavi will be grateful for the updated list of the many newer Avicennan editions (especially in Iran, Egypt and the *Avicenna Latinus* of S. Van Riet at Louvain), as well as for the author's prudent and well-founded observations concerning the chronology, authenticity and interrelations of a number of titles. Unfortunately for students more at home in English, the list of Avicennan translations--including almost a dozen of the author's own recent translations (often with accompanying editions) of lesser-known short treatises and chapters from Avicenna--and of secondary studies is limited to those works (especially in French) actually cited in the notes to this volume, and therefore leaves out some useful and accessible corresponding studies and translations (by Hourani, Morewedge, Nasr, Wolfson and others) available in English.

from a more modestly empiricist point of view would otherwise naturally tend to overlook or minimize.

Finally, Prof. Michot has placed Avicenna squarely in his original Islamic historical context, not only through his continuous provision of careful citations from dozens of the philosopher's own writings, but also by his repeated references to several historically influential students and commentators (especially Ghazali, F. Razi, N. Tusi, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra) and to the topics and approaches they found most interesting and fruitful. The result--most obviously with the eschatological question that provides the structural framework for the book as a whole--is to suggest philosophic perspectives (especially with regard to religious and kalam topics) and possibilities often substantially different from those raised in earlier works that have focused on Avicenna's relations to Aristotle and his later Greek commentators, or on the contrast with Averroes and their reception in medieval Europe. Whatever one's judgment of the philosophic and scientific value of those perspectives (or of their importance for understanding Avicenna's own original intentions), they do faithfully represent the ways his work--and with it, "philosophy" as a whole--was frequently understood and interpreted by a great many of his later Islamic interpreters.⁵

The starting point and guiding theme of this work (ch. I) is the problem posed by Avicenna's hypothesis--which he openly invokes only very briefly, and usually (as with his

⁵The available European-language accounts of Islamic philosophy, with their natural focus on the Arabic "transmission" and subsequent Western adaptation of Hellenistic thought, rarely even mention the extraordinary extent to which Avicenna's works rapidly and for the most part definitively supplanted the independent study and commentary of translations of Aristotle (and other Greek philosophic writers) throughout the Eastern Islamic world. (The resulting widespread perception of Avicenna's metaphysical and psychological writing--especially in terms of the more religious or theological understanding reflected in Dr. Michot's study--as virtually synonymous with "philosophy" and the conclusions of unaided "reason" was especially marked in broader intellectual circles outside the handful of genuine specialists in philosophic or scientific studies.)

Avicenna's role as the prism through which subsequent Islamic thinkers largely viewed the earlier philosophic tradition (despite the honoring of Aristotle and Farabi as the "First" and "Second Teachers") was further enhanced, at some unknown but early date, by the widely accepted attribution to Farabi of a work of Avicenna's known (in its "Farabian" guise) as the *K. Fusus al-Hikam*. The almost universal acceptance of that attribution, to the extent that the *Fusus* was more widely studied than the genuine works of Farabi, seems to have obscured any wider awareness of his radically different teachings in most of the Islamic world, apart from their well-known adaptations in Andalusia and the Maghreb by thinkers (Averroes, Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufayl, Maimonides, etc.) whose perspectives had relatively little immediate echo in the world of Avicenna's Eastern heirs and interpreters.

"Oriental Wisdom" more generally) through oblique reference to certain unidentified spokesmen--of an "imaginal," sensible afterlife (apparently corresponding to the corporeal rewards and punishments promised in the prophetic scriptures), in conjunction with the heavenly bodies (or their angelic souls), for that vast majority of humanity who have not achieved man's ultimate, purely intellectual or noetic perfection. The rest of the book, after a brief summary of the framework of this problem as posed by Avicenna's theory of the twofold functions of prophecy and revelation and his underlying "anthropological dualism" (i.e., the contrast between the purely intellectual and infra-rational dimensions of man's being), carefully examines the possible theoretical justifications for this imaginal eschatology in every relevant area of Avicenna's philosophic system. Prof. Michot's method, in each chapter, involves three closely interrelated levels of interpretation: 1) the elaborate, textually buttressed presentation of Avicennan doctrines or tendencies that would justify this particular theory; 2) summary reference to supporting interpretations from a wide range of later commentators or thinkers who openly adopted this "Avicennan" theory (F. Razi, N. Tusi, Suhrawardi, and especially the two Madnun's attributed to Ghazali); and 3) the author's own more independent suggestions of philosophic possibilities implicitly contained in certain key Avicennan concepts⁶--an approach in which he closely follows the tendencies (and often the conclusions) of later Islamic "commentators," especially Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra.⁷

While the problem of an imaginal eschatology, taken by itself, might at first appear to be of relatively minor or tangential importance in the larger context of Avicenna's philosophy (whether or not one accepts the author's many substantial arguments in its favor), the wider and lasting value of this work, as we have already indicated, lies in the richness of its documentation

⁶In particular, Prof. Michot's original comments (especially in ch. III) concerning the "intelligible" nature and moral (and even potentially aesthetic) functions of practical reason, in terms of man's relation with the angelic souls of the spheres, develop dimensions of Avicenna's concepts which received relatively little attention among subsequent Islamic commentators in any tradition.

⁷In particular, readers familiar with the philosophy of these latter two Islamic thinkers [see n. 3 above] will surely be struck by the way Prof. Michot's original development (in chapter II) of the more "spiritualized" and Neoplatonic possibilities in Avicenna's metaphysics is expressed in terms--e.g., of the "intensity" or "density" of being; "mental being"; and a universe of manifold "epiphanic mirrors" and "creative epiphanies"--which almost literally recall the technical terminology and metaphysical perspectives that are the creative focus of both those later figures. (However, it is significant that both those thoroughly Platonic philosophers also felt themselves to be rebelling against the prevalent "Peripatetic," scholastic understanding of Avicenna in their own time.)

and Dr. Michot's careful and insightful presentation of all the related areas of Avicenna's systematic thought--especially those metaphysical and epistemological questions, usually presented in an overtly theological or religious language, which eventually came to dominate much subsequent consideration of Avicenna's work in the Islamic world. This systematic and dense, but impressively clear analysis of the relevant areas of Avicenna's thought begins by setting forth the Neoplatonic, "spiritualist" tendencies in his metaphysics and ontology (ch. II); goes on to outline the corresponding epistemological possibilities (especially the key role of the "angelic" intellects and souls of the heavenly spheres) in Avicenna's understanding of the relations of sensation, imagination and practical reason; continues with a suggestive discussion of his "idealism of sensation" (and imagination) and the possibilities (openly evoked in his *Mubahathat* and commentary on the *Theology of 'Aristotle'*) of the actual mode of "survival" of the mass of unenlightened souls in connection with the heavenly spheres; and concludes (ch. V) by stressing the considerable problems (eschatological and otherwise) and limitations still posed by Avicenna's rigorous "intellectualism," as highlighted by the contrasting approaches of Ghazali and Ibn 'Arabi. Not surprisingly, given his chosen theme, the author consistently and almost exclusively emphasizes the Neoplatonic, "spiritualist" and ethical and religious potentialities in each area of Avicenna's thought. This guiding interpretive tendency has both advantages and certain dangers for those unacquainted with the wider range of Avicenna's writing and other alternative interpretations--although fortunately those dangers are often balanced, for reflective readers, by this work's carefully literal approach and provision of so many supporting texts.

In short, this study beautifully illustrates four fundamental (and each almost equally problematic) characteristic features of all of Avicenna's writing that help account for the tremendous variety of interpretations and uses to which it was put in later Islamic thought--and which are also no doubt responsible for some of the perspectives and limitations shared by those otherwise conflicting traditions. First, there is Avicenna's clearly intentional, but almost always highly ambiguous use of "religious" rhetoric and vocabulary (as well as his no less frequent implicit references to prominent issues in earlier *kalam* and Ismaili theology), a stylistic feature which was one of his more noticeable departures from the philosophic writing of Farabi and his later interpreters in the Islamic West. Like Prof. Michot, subsequent Islamic interpreters--especially those defending *kalam* positions or various forms of Islamic mysticism--frequently tended to take Avicenna's apparent "eschatology," "prophetology," "angelology," treatment of

"miracles," etc. (understood in an explicitly Islamic frame of reference) to be the primary focus of his remarks concerning those subjects, as though his philosophic discussions were ultimately intended as (or at any rate turned out to be) a justification for a broader set of more popular beliefs in those areas, and as though unexamined assumptions concerning those religious topics could in turn be used to amplify or interpret the corresponding domains of Avicenna's philosophic thought.⁸ However, in most cases the same remarks could also be construed more sceptically and rationalistically--i.e., in precisely the opposite direction--as suggesting alternative critical philosophic perspectives for judging, interpreting or transforming those same sets of religious beliefs. Secondly, there is Avicenna's notoriously problematic combination of what (following the author), we may term "Neoplatonic" and "Peripatetic" concepts and philosophic tendencies, a pervasive characteristic that has been noted by virtually every subsequent commentator on his thought. These conceptual ambiguities or unresolved questions are not simply recondite matters of scholastic "doctrine": their inescapable interrelations with fundamental practical issues concerning the aims and presuppositions of man's philosophic (and religious) life are strikingly exemplified in the radically opposing tendencies of later Islamic "Avicennan" traditions.⁹ Again, this study repeatedly illustrates the historically close systematic relations between this feature of Avicenna's writing and the problems arising from his use of religious language, since there has almost invariably been a significant correlation between the degree of emphasis interpreters give to the "Neoplatonic" or spiritual tendencies in Avicenna's

⁸We have already mentioned Averroes' and Ibn Taymiya's convergent remarks (from very different starting points) concerning this aspect of Avicenna's writing and his later influence. In all fairness, it should be added that Prof. Michot vigorously denies any "fideist" tendency in Avicenna's thought and stresses, both at the beginning and in his conclusions, the thoroughly "intellectualist" and self-confident character of his philosophic approach to religion.

⁹Thus, for example, both defenders of a more "Peripatetic" understanding of Avicenna's work, such as Nasir al-Din Tusi, and more mystical and spiritually oriented critics (like Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra) were careful to point out the close concordance between Avicenna's often vehement theoretical attacks on earlier Neoplatonic ideas and authors and his main practical life-orientations and activities (politics and administration, medicine, personal ethical behavior, etc.), which cast a somewhat sceptical light on his already ambiguous and hesitant use of religious and "other-worldly" rhetoric. Similarly, Tusi's famous polemic against Fakhr al-Razi (with its ensuing echoes on both sides down through the centuries of *muhakamat*) is only comprehensible in terms of the radically different practical implications and presuppositions (both personal and socio-political) of those two typically opposing interpretations of Avicenna's thought.

philosophy elements and the importance they grant to the role of religious concerns and insights in the elaboration of his thought.¹⁰

A third characteristic feature of Avicenna's philosophy, again frequently overlapping with the two preceding points, is the considerable degree of vagueness or inadequate resolution in many of his most fundamental notions, an indeterminacy which could often be developed in radically different directions. Some of these areas--such as his conception of the relative roles of material (or intellectual) "preparedness" (*isti'dad*) and "illumination" or "emanation" from above; the ambiguities in his "formalism" (both ontological and epistemological) between "intellectualist" or far more wide-ranging "spiritualist" interpretations; the exact nature and extent of the "contents" (spiritual, ethical, legal, etc.) of the forms and particulars known and "revealed" by the angelic souls and intellects; the uncertainties surrounding his treatment of the "practical intellect"--are thoroughly illustrated in this book. And similar cases, such as Avicenna's conception of the relations between existence and essence, or between his "general" metaphysics and theology, were equally important in the development of different later traditions of Islamic thought. Finally, there is the related problem of the considerable restrictions (and sometimes surprising philosophic opportunities) posed by the systematic and even apparently "deductive" character (or at least expression) of Avicenna's thinking, a feature which--as Averroes and other critics did not hesitate to point out--often closely resembles the procedures and results of earlier *kalam* theology. One obvious danger, given such a logically and metaphysically coherent (and theologically persuasive) structure, is that it is very hard to liberate one's thinking and expression, even when beginning with radically different insights or presuppositions, from the inner constraints of that system. And more often than not, that thinking itself can easily be dictated by the inner logic of possibilities and difficulties inherent in

¹⁰Most often (both in the past and among modern interpreters) these ambiguities have been resolved by reference to an "evolution" of Avicenna's thinking (and a corresponding chronology of his writings) or to his lost (and supposedly more mystical) "Oriental Wisdom" (*hikma mashriqiya*). Instead Prof. Michot, on the basis of long and close acquaintance with the entire Avicennan corpus, stresses--quite rightly, in our opinion--the "systematic unity" of Avicenna's thinking, which seems to exhibit similar internal tensions at all periods. However, he does point out some solidly documented particular instances, on points of relative detail, where the mature Avicenna seems to have given up more Aristotelean (or Farabian) doctrinal positions he had retained in his youth.

the system itself, rather than by any more profound reflection on the nature of reality.¹¹ Again as with later kalam, the historical outcome of this situation--whenever the claim to ultimate "wisdom" (hikma) was taken literally, replacing any more modest acknowledgement of man's condition of philo-sophia--was frequently, at best, a sort of scholasticization, an internal debate between set positions too often culminating in stagnation and fossilization.

Because of its ambitious scope, thoroughness, and rare combination of clarity and attention to detail in exploring all these basic issues, Dr. Michot's book sheds much new light on the "Islamic Avicenna" and can be expected to quickly become a classic reference in the study of the many related traditions of later Islamic thought.

¹¹Each of the central chapters of Prof. Michot's work offers a number of particularly striking illustrations of such possibilities in Avicenna's systematic thought: e.g., where his metaphysical formulations concerning the nature of the "angels," the structure of divine creation and emanation, or "prophetic" inspiration are themselves taken as starting points for further philosophic developments; this procedure and its assumptions--as the author occasionally admits--are not always easily reconcilable with other apparently more "empiricist" aspects of Avicenna's work.

Le Kitāb al-inbāh 'alā tariq Allāh de 'Abdallāh Badr al-Habashī: un témoignage de l'enseignement spirituel de Muhyī l-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī. Translated and edited by Denis Gril, *Annales Islamologiques* XV (1979), Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, pp. 97-146 (introduction and translation) and 104-170 (Arabic text and indexes).

This short, but remarkably dense and insightful "Book of Awakening to the Path of God" (No. 287 in O. Yahya's classification of Ibn 'Arabi's writings) is truly a hidden treasure. Completed before Badr's death in 618/1219, this selection of some 79 of the Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual "sayings" and directives by one of his closest disciples and lifelong companions (for whom, among others, he composed such major works as the *Futuhat*, *Insha' al-Dawa'ir*, *Mawaqif al-Nujum* and the commentary on his *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*) offers an invaluable glimpse of his more personal activity and practical teaching as a Sufi master. Because of the more intimate, practical focus of this treatise--which, not surprisingly, reflects both the wider body of traditional Sufi thought and practice, as well as spiritual experiences and temptations familiar to almost every reader--it offers a valuable complement to the emphasis on Ibn 'Arabi's more distinctive metaphysical teachings and formulations (especially in the *Fusus*) that has frequently colored subsequent presentations of his work both in Islamic countries and in the modern West. Not only does the very form of the work, with its juxtaposition of quotations on such apparently diverse topics and levels of experience and understanding, faithfully convey much of the flavor of the living relations between a master and his disciples, but it also reminds us, both explicitly and implicitly, of the many problems posed by the context of oral teaching and spiritual practice in which Ibn 'Arabi's other writings were originally composed.

At the same time, the extraordinary range of this work (stylistically, as well as in its subject matter), combined with its simplicity and economy of expression, would qualify it (given the necessary annotation) as an excellent introduction to the inner dimensions of Islamic spirituality more generally, and even as a fascinating collection of meditations on the spiritual life for readers without any particular background in either Ibn 'Arabi or Sufism. The striking accessibility and universality of these meditations (ranging from gnomic "*hikam*", resembling the celebrated Sufi aphorisms of Ibn 'Ata' Allah, to longer, subtle analyses of spiritual states much like the chapters on the *maqamat* in the *Futuhat*) flow from Badr's consistent choice of sayings focusing directly on the soul--and formulated with the finesse and subtlety of expression that characterize all of Ibn 'Arabi's writing--, while the theological and metaphysical dimensions of that experience most often appear only in the background. At the same time, the variety of

spiritual states and conditions evoked here defies summarization: the "Path of God", as Badr repeatedly indicates, extends to all the creatures, and the "awakening" Ibn 'Arabi is pointing to takes place on many levels. Clearly his work is by no means intended exclusively for "beginners", and we expect that many readers will eventually find it to be the sort of spiritual classic which takes on renewed depth and meaning at each reading.

More specialized students of Ibn 'Arabi or of Sufism in its historical aspects are likely to find this work equally intriguing for other reasons. To begin with, it points to the still largely unstudied dimensions of Ibn 'Arabi's work and subsequent influence as a practicing shaykh and spiritual teacher (as manifested, e.g., in the *khirqā akbariyya*), while at the same time it offers a salutary reminder of the considerable limitations of all literary evidence in this realm. (It is no accident if Badr places his master's pointed advice on how one should approach and benefit from the sayings of the "people of God" at the very center of his book, no.'s 39 and 40.) Secondly (and again like much of the *Futuhat*), this book gives the reader an immediate impression of the concrete, practical context and recurrent spiritual (and mundane) realities underlying the relatively theoretical discussions of metaphysics, Islamic theology or the "stages of the Path" in much of the Sufi literature now available in translation. Thus the student of Ibn 'Arabi will quickly recognize here many of the key themes and characteristic emphases to be found throughout his writings: his insistence on integral respect of the letter of Revelation; the supreme rank of the "Knower through God" (*'alim bi-Allah*) and his "return" to a transformed awareness of the manifest forms of creation; the central ontological and spiritual functions of the imagination; his stress on true "servanthood" (*'ubudiyya* and the related spiritual virtues) as the most effective approach to God; the uses and limitations of the intellect; etc. But here, as Badr (and his master) no doubt intended, the reader is obliged to confront those issues as they arise directly in his own experience.

Prof. Gril is to be commended not only for having brought this work to the attention of a wider public, but also for the quality of his Arabic edition (based on 6 manuscripts, the oldest less than a century after al-Habashi's death), the elaborate index of technical terms (pp. 147-164), and his elegant translation--especially remarkable given the difficulties of these often highly condensed and sometimes technical Arabic expressions. The introduction (pp. 97-103), in addition to discussing the manuscripts, summarizes the references to al-Habashi scattered through Ibn 'Arabi's works (virtually our only biographical sources) and briefly presents a few of

the most characteristic themes of this book. The few footnotes referring to corresponding passages in the *Futuhāt* and other works offer essential background for some of the more laconic passages, but the translator--not surprisingly, in a scholarly Arabic journal aimed at specialists in this domain--has not attempted to provide the more extensive annotation and explanation (both of traditional Sufi vocabulary and of Ibn 'Arabi's own ideas) that might be needed by more general readers. In view of the special qualities and potentially broader interest of this book (and the relative inaccessibility of the *Annales*), we may hope that Prof. Gril, who is ideally equipped for the task, will eventually publish a separate, expanded version of his translation, and that the availability of this Arabic edition will soon encourage the preparation of an English translation as well.

La Risâla de Saif al-Dîn Ibn Abî l-Mansûr Ibn Zâfir: Biographies des maîtres spirituels connus par un cheikh égyptien du VII^e/XIII^e siècle. Introduction, édition et traduction par DENIS GRIL. Cairo/Paris, Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO), 1986. [257 pp. French; 116 pp. Arabic text and indexes.] FF 380.

The core of this remarkable work, originally presented as a doctoral thesis at the Université de Provence in 1983, is the carefully annotated edition (on the basis of a unique surviving manuscript) and translation of a most unusual text: the memoirs of a prominent 13th-century Egyptian Sufî shaykh who, near the very end of his long and active life (595/1198-682/1283), recorded his spiritual encounters, affiliations (both direct and indirect) and experiences with dozens of noted masters and saints of his time, including such famous figures as al-Shâdhilî, Suhrawardî, and Ibn 'Arabî. Quite apart from the specific historical details of this work that have attracted earlier researchers, it is above all a moving, immediately accessible human document that can be read with pleasure (and edification) even by students with little or no specialized background, while providing an indispensable concrete, living complement to the primarily "theoretical" emphases of most traditional Sufî literature now available in translation.

What lends the *Risâla* this broader human dimension--while at the same time distinguishing it from related writings in such more familiar genres as Islamic hagiography (e.g., the well-known works of 'Attâr, Jâmî, the *Hilyat al-Awliyâ'*, etc.) and the various biographical *Tabaqât*--is its thoroughly personal, essentially autobiographical point of view and its relatively informal, almost private mode of expression, unconcerned with the apologetic or didactic aims and diverse stylistic or doctrinal concerns that inevitably colored more formal writings directed toward a larger public. The many brief, cameo-like portraits making up the *Risâla* are structured, for the most part, around deceptively simple anecdotal expressions of the author's own mature religious insight and teaching, in an openly subjective, personal approach that is closer both to the actual methods of individual spiritual practice and instruction (including their manifold interactions with every area of "ordinary" life), and to their common human experiential grounds. For the focus of Safî's interest in these masters and saints is not so much their individual biographical particularities (or historical and literary accomplishments) as it is the more profound spiritual type, insight or distinctive lesson that is exemplified in most cases by a single representative incident or exploit--often involving dream-visions or even more spectacular *karâmât*--connected with each shaykh.

The composite result of all these illustrations is a fascinating historical mosaic that vividly conveys the full living variety of methods, personalities, masters, and intellectual and social structures which--against the background of an incredible ferment of travel (*siyāha*), popular fervor and the creative interactions of many masters and currents of thought--apparently still typified *tasawwuf* in Ayyubid society (and its Islamic neighbors) at this time, just prior to the more rigid institutionalization associated with the later Sufism of the *tarīqas*. Prof. Gril's long introduction (pp. 1-80) and related bio-bibliographical appendices (pp. 205-253), together with his detailed notes to the translation and edition, are largely devoted to filling out this wider historical background and solving the complex puzzles that are posed by Safi's brief references to a host of otherwise little-known shaykhs, saints and disciples whose careers (and related web of initiatic and personal relations) more often than not stretched from Andalusia and Morocco to Syria and Iraq. (Incidentally, the translator frequently notes the many indications--in the *Risāla*, at least--of a more distinct separation, both socially and intellectually, between the Arab shaykhs and saints known to Safi and the Persian-speaking "Sufi" masters and their teachings in the same period, even in cities and regions where the two currents are definitely known to have coexisted.) In addition, the richness and variety of the historical sources (both by Sufis and by authors from other disciplines) that are brought together in these sections likewise help to suggest the potential usefulness of texts like the *Risāla* for historians interested in such related questions as the social and political dimensions of *tasawwuf* and its gradual institutionalization; the conditions underlying the apparent wave of Andalusian and Maghrebi emigration (quite apart from the Hajj) in this period; or even the description of "mentalités" and the popular imagination (with regard to dreams, *karāmât*, types of sainthood, etc.).

But if Prof. Gril often touches on such broader historical topics raised by the *Risāla*--particularly in his concluding chapter on "The Shaykhs in the City" and in his earlier discussion of "The Main Currents of Egyptian Tasawwuf" (dealing with the disciples and influences, in Safi's work, of such key historical figures Abû Madyan, Ibn al-'Arîf, Ahmad al-Rifâ'î, 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Gîlânî, and al-Shâdhilî)--, the focus of his own personal interest is clearly reflected in the most fully developed section of the Introduction, his study of "Tasawwuf in the *Risāla*" (pp. 35-67). There, in highly condensed form, he provides a rich and subtle analysis of the many concrete illustrations, throughout the *Risāla*, of such practically critical matters as the pedagogical relations of master and disciple (or of Sufi "brothers"); the role of different rites and

practices (*dhikr* and Koran recitation, *samâ'*, *khalwa*, etc.); the constant interplay of spiritual knowledge and realization (especially here in relation to the "Reality of Muhammad"); the problem of spiritual types and technical terminology; etc. By discussing these fundamental issues in a constant dialogue with the better-known doctrinal writings of other Sufi authors (especially Ibn 'Arabî's *Futûhât*, which was largely rooted in the same particular historical currents of *tasawwuf*), Prof. Gril is able to bring out the deeper significance and presuppositions of many of the stories and events recounted in the *Risâla*, while underlining the very real limitations of all writing in this domain. And in at least two of these areas--his insistence on the clear distinction between spiritual and ethical "virtues", and his analysis of the primary significance of the *karâmât* (of whatever type) in terms of the disciple's own inner spiritual development--Prof. Gril has offered some of the clearest, most insightful writing we have ever encountered in scholarly discussions of these central aspects of Islamic mysticism.

In short, this thorough, elaborately presented study of an important Sufi text--while whetting the historian's appetite for more such editions and translations--also provides a necessary, vividly detailed reminder of the full range of phenomena and diverse historical contexts underlying what is too often unreflectedly lumped together as "Sufi literature." As such, it could serve a useful role in almost any course on this key aspect of Islamic tradition (as well as in more phenomenological, cross-cultural approaches to these dimensions of spirituality and religious experience). Thus, while acknowledging the beautiful printing and presentation that typify this and other publications of IFAO, one can only hope that in this case Prof. Gril's translation (and introduction) will also eventually become available separately, in a format more accessible to most students and individual scholars.

Manjhan, *Madhumālatī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, translated by Simon Weightman and Aditya Behl, with S.M. Pandey. Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000. Iviii + 258 pages.

Faithful readers of this journal (and students of Sufism more generally) are probably at least vaguely aware of the considerable influence of ideas and teachings of Ibn 'Arabī in the course of the gradual spread of Islam and Perso-Islamic culture throughout India in the centuries following his death, through the related studies—to mention only a few familiar names—of W. Chittick, C. Ernst, A. Schimmel, A. Rizvi and many others. Unfortunately, however, the most familiar images and stereotypes concerning that influence continue to reflect the ongoing modern polemics, rooted more in contemporary politics than in past religious or cultural history, surrounding the controversial views of Sirhindi.

This new, very readable and accessible translation from the courtly Hindavī poem (composed in 1545) by S. Weightman and A. Behl, suggests richer, more creative and lasting strands of Akbarian influence. At the same time, it is also a delightful, unforgettable 'romance' epic of spiritual transformation in its own right. On first encounter, if one were to begin with the translation itself and pass over the remarkably rich and accessible introduction and explanatory notes provided by the translators, those without a serious knowledge of Sufi traditions would probably feel they were reading a highly symbolic Hindu or Sanskrit romance broadly reminiscent, in its combination of rich human drama and complex metaphysical symbolism, of either the *Divine Comedy* or Goethe's *Faust*. However, the highly condensed historical Introduction and Simon Weightman's remarkable Appendix clearly explain the complex roots of this narrative in the Shattārī Sufi lineage and training of the author, who was himself a respected shaykh of that order as well as an influential and accomplished literary artist.

Readers interested in Ibn 'Arabī and the deeper Sufi dimensions of this text should turn first to Simon Weightman's masterful Appendix ('The Symmetry of *Madhumālatī*'), which carefully summarises both the practical yogic-Sufi and aesthetic dimensions of the story and especially its elaborate transposition of Qur'anic cosmology and eschatology as understood by Ibn 'Arabī and his later philosophic and Sufi interpreters. Prof. Weightman's thorough analysis of these multiple structural symmetries—whose parallel complexities are certainly familiar to any student of Dante's masterwork, and which he and his students are now fruitfully exploring in the complex narrative structures of Rumi's *Masnavī*—should suggest the almost unimaginably

enormous gaps which still exist in our critical understanding and appreciation of so many of the classics of later Islamic literature (Persian, Ottoman, Urdu, etc.), a phenomenon which is surely not unconnected to today's so commonly impoverished intellectual appreciation of the essential metaphysical dimensions of Qur'anic teaching. In particular, Manjhan's detailed focus, founded on Ibn 'Arabī and his interpreters, on the allegorical depiction of the cosmological, 'emanative' dimensions of Qur'anic (and classical Hindu) teaching and its subsequent reflection in the ascending planes of realisation, is an essential aspect of this mystical 'romance' that goes beyond the overt emphasis on the more practical dimensions of spiritual ascent in both Dante and *Faust*.

Much of the translators' Introduction and Notes focuses on the central dimension of 'taste'—at once a shared set of cultural-aesthetic assumptions, and corresponding spiritual realities—unifying and underlying the complex symbolism and inherited rhetorical forms of this extraordinary poem. Those powerful aesthetic dimensions of this text, still quite palpable in this fluent and eminently readable translation, are a convincing reminder that Ibn 'Arabī's classical Muslim interpreters in this and other newly 'islamising' cultures were engaged in something far deeper than a merely random 'syncretism' (understood as sort of sterile 'name-game' reminiscent of today's empty ideological enterprises of 'islamisation') or the strictly philosophical elaboration of a personal theory of the 'transcendent unity of religions'. Instead, what the attentive reader can immediately experience here, even today, is clearly a challenging, powerfully effective *creative* synthesis dictated by the living interaction of actually operative cultural norms, languages, symbols and artistic and spiritual possibilities.

This combination of the careful study of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings (or of Islamic scriptures understood in their light), philosophical acumen, and immensely creative, lastingly influential literary and social invention—the deepest possible realisation of that *ihsān* ('making good and beautiful') which the famous 'hadith of Gabriel' identifies as the ultimate aim of real Religion (*dīn*)—is a constant sign of the genuine assimilation of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, whether in such earlier key literary figures as 'Irāqī, Ibn al-Fārid, and the great poet-philosopher Jāmī, or with Manjhan here in early Mughal India. Through seminal works like this study, we are only beginning to appreciate how profoundly the inspirations of Ibn 'Arabī continued to inspire similarly creative figures throughout the post-Mongol eastward expansion of Islam into southeast Asia and China, both in literature and in more anonymous, but no less influential, social domains.

Finally, Manjhan's own historical situation is another helpful reminder that the great classics of Islamic civilisation, in every field, were typically forged in rapidly changing, tumultuous and unavoidably multi-cultural situations precisely like our own. Against that backdrop, his creative accomplishment should suggest remarkable parallels to—and potential lessons for—our own time. Ibn 'Arabī's unswerving focus on returning to the actual *realities* underlying all human experience and the superficially warring interpretations of revelation takes us far beyond the sterile gambits (and Protagorean journalistic assumptions) of inter-religious and inter-civilisational 'dialogue'. The central theme of *Madhumālatī*, at every level, is that of ever-renewed 'marriage' (echoing the role of *azwāj* throughout the Qur'an): i.e., of the necessity of creative, challenging re-union of initially conflicting and apparently disparate principles in the deeper cosmic processes of renewal and spiritual perfection. For us, it is another helpful reminder, in remarkably similar historical circumstances, that the attractions of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, like the beauty of each Beloved, are only the very beginning of the story, drawing us into the adventurous necessity of forging new, authentic and effective forms of community and vehicles of realisation.

Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art. By Titus Burckhardt. Translated and edited by William Stoddart. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. 270 pages.

One could not imagine a better introduction--or more suitable homage--to the life's work of T. Burckhardt (1908-1984) than the 25 essays collected and translated here, together with a short biographical note. Even readers already acquainted with Burckhardt's books on Islamic mysticism or medieval Christian (and Islamic) architecture and religious arts are likely to be surprised by the vast range of subjects and religious traditions covered in these articles, and those encountering his writings for the first time can pursue their particular interests through the complete bibliography of his publications (and subsequent translations in five languages) provided at the end.

The editor has divided these articles (drawn from a wide range of French and German-language publications) into four sections, roughly corresponding to the main subjects and religious traditions dealt with in all of Burckhardt's writings. The opening studies on "Traditional Cosmology and the Modern World" are representative of his lifelong efforts to point out the deeper symbolic and spiritual significance and lasting validity of common cosmological themes and assumptions shared by many of the world religions. (Fortunately for most readers, this is also the only section where the polemic tone and familiar dogmatic assumptions associated with the works of R. Guénon are particularly in evidence.) The following shorter studies on "Christian Themes"--ranging from Dante and Chartres to Russian icons and Swiss folk art--illustrate in a brief space that recurrent concern for bringing out the spiritual meaning and intentions of sacred iconography which is the unifying focus of Burckhardt's many books on the religious art and architecture of medieval Christianity and Islam.

The articles in the following section on "Symbolism and Mythology" turn the same eye for spiritual symbolism to themes that are either more universal (the symbolism of the mirror, water, alchemy or the sacred mask) or tied to less familiar religious traditions ("The Return of Ulysses" and the Crow sun dance). Precisely because these subjects are less bound up with familiar schemas of interpretation, these essays--such as Burckhardt's masterly unfolding of the "Symbolism of Chess"--are likely to give the clearest sense both of his actual spiritual method and of the *autobiographical* dimension,

the particular spiritual and aesthetic sensibility that brought together such outwardly disparate interests.

Finally, the essays on "Islamic Themes" (including translations and commentaries on works of Ghazali and Ibn Mashīsh) point to the area of Burckhardt's work, including his pioneering translations from Ibn 'Arabi and other Islamic mystics, which is probably destined to have the greatest lasting influence. Paradoxically, as can be seen in some of his latest writings here, his original attempts to transmit something of an earlier living Sufi tradition to a European audience have turned out to be of even greater interest to modern Muslims, from many backgrounds, for whom the loss of tradition and the secular disenchantment of the world (especially as promoted in religious "reformist" and "fundamentalist" guise) are far more than speculatively academic and historical questions.

Readers approaching these writings for the first time are likely to be struck not so much by any "school" or "doctrine" as by a sense of the individual, of having encountering someone with an extraordinary aesthetic and spiritual sensitivity--a quality that may not be unrelated to the author's own family background (including the famous historian Jacob Burckhardt). If there is a single unifying principle in these works drawn from such different contexts, it is perhaps best suggested in the brief "letter on spiritual method", summarizing the functions and qualifications of a genuine spiritual master, that the editor has placed at the very end. Just as the classical Sufi poets offered endless tales and images designed to awaken their listeners to the divine reality and presence within all the forms and events of their daily lives, so this writer seems to have been driven to penetrate and transmit the spiritual meanings of whatever "traditional" symbols and rituals he happened to encounter. And if, as Burckhardt often insists, such intentions, in pointing "beyond forms", necessarily follow a different direction from the more familiar historical and analytical approaches of academia, still scholars and amateurs alike, from many fields, will no doubt continue to draw inspiration from the studies (and the often "iconoclastic" perspective) represented here.

Only those familiar with the diversity of Burckhardt's writings and the difficulties of the original French and German texts (often full of transliterations from Arabic,

Sanskrit, etc.) can fully appreciate the editor/translator's efforts, both in organizing and translating this material, and his constant attention to detail. A measure of his true success is that one is rarely aware of reading a translation.

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An Arab “Machiavelli”? : Rhetoric, Philosophy and Politics in Ibn Khaldun’s Critique of “Sufism”

Thoughtful and informed students of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* are well aware that in many places his masterwork is anything but a straightforwardly “objective” or “encyclopedic” summary of the available histories and other Islamic sciences of his day. Instead, his writing throughout that work illustrates a highly complex, distinctive rhetoric which is constantly informed by the twofold focuses of his all-encompassing political philosophy. The first and most obvious interest is discovering the essential pre-conditions for lastingly effective political and social organization—a task which involves far more than the outward passing forms of “power”. And the second is his ultimate end: the effective reform of contemporary education, culture and religion in directions which would better encourage the ultimate human perfection of true scientific, philosophic “knowing”. In both of those areas, any understanding of Ibn Khaldun’s unique rhetoric—with its characteristic mix of multiple levels of meaning and intention expressed through irony, polemic satire, intentional misrepresentation and omissions; or equally unexpected inclusion and praise—necessarily presupposes an informed knowledge of the actual political, cultural and intellectual worlds and corresponding attitudes and assumptions of various readers of his own time. Hence it is not surprising that so many modern-day students have overlooked or even more gravely misinterpreted many of most powerful polemic elements and intentions in his writing—elements which originally were often as intentionally provocative and “politically incorrect” (indeed frequently for similar purposes!) as the notorious writings of Machiavelli were in his time.

One striking illustration of these two key dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s writing, both throughout the *Muqaddima* and in his earlier *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*, is his profoundly critical approach to both the intellectual and the manifold wider “popular” (including central political and economic) influences and expressions associated with what modern writers often conveniently

term “Sufism”: i.e., a vast complex of far-reaching creative currents in Islamic cultures and religious life in Ibn Khaldun’s time which were often closely associated with or at least symbolized by the distinctive terminology and teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and his popular interpreters. Recent historical research has highlighted and begun to illuminate the ways those same creative developments, so fundamentally and consistently criticized by Ibn Khaldun throughout his life, were to become central in the spread of Islamic culture into China, South Asia and Indonesia, while inspiring many of the most distinctive cultural contributions and religious forms of life in the great empires of the Ottomans, Moguls and Safavids. Unfortunately, the very different emphases and ideological presuppositions of twentieth-century Arab and other Muslim intellectuals have frequently tended to obscure the many ways Ibn Khaldun’s own Mamluk Cairo was itself participating centrally in those world-historical developments which are such a central and recurrent target of his critical endeavors.

This study is devoted to outlining and explaining both the intellectual and the diverse social and political dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of contemporary “Sufism”. The first focus of our discussion is his devastating criticism—closely following classical philosophic approaches in the writings of Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl and Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī—of any and all *epistemological* pretensions and corresponding claims to true religious authority in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and many other Sufi writers. The second, inherently more disparate, subject is his careful indications for the philosophical and learned elite among his readers of the potential *practical* “uses and abuses” of Sufi rhetoric and language in various religious and political contexts, often expressed in contrasting emphases in his discussion of symbolically central historical characters (the Prophet, Umayyads, etc.) and religio-political events. In particular, since much of Ibn Khaldun’s rhetoric in those more practical contexts ostensibly parallels the familiar “traditionalist” language of Ibn Taymiyya and his followers, we have highlighted the radically different political and social motives and ultimate intentions which actually guide Ibn Khaldun’s superficially similar criticisms and often damning “faint praise” in this domain.

EPISTEMOLOGY AS POLITICAL THEOLOGY: KEY FEATURES OF LATER “SUFİ” THOUGHT

We have placed the words “Sufi” in quotation marks in our title because for the vast majority of even scholarly readers who are not specialists in later Islamic thought, that term is in fact not likely to suggest anything remotely approaching that immense new *specific complex of*

interrelated intellectual, cultural and socio-institutional forms which, in the rapidly expanding post-Mongol “East” and “North” of the Islamic world, were typically associated with the extraordinary spread of Islam as a truly world religion. As we can now see in retrospect, those far-reaching historical developments definitively transcended in fundamental ways the earlier, much more exclusively “Arab” (linguistic, cultural and institutional) historical forms and assumptions which still largely determine the depiction of Islamic history and culture throughout Ibn Khaldun’s work. Over the past two decades, growing multi-national research by intellectual and religious historians from the many areas concerned has begun to reveal the central underlying role of the writings of the key figure of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), as they were developed, systematized and popularized by a host of remarkably creative and lastingly influential theologians, poets, teachers and reformers, in continuing to provide the indispensable intellectual framework and religious justification for this much wider complex of new cultural and social forms.¹ In many ways, those ideas have both reflected and helped to shape the intellectually, culturally and politically dominant self-conceptions of “Islam” among most of the world’s Muslims from the 13th on down to at least the 19th century. Indeed nothing could be more alien and fundamentally contrary to *this* history than the familiar symbolism of “decline”, “corruption”, and (negatively understood) “innovation” that has so often shaped the rhetorical presentation—and no doubt the underlying appeal—of Ibn Khaldun’s writings among so many Muslim thinkers from the 19th century onward.

Since, as we now understand in considerable historical detail, the Mamluk Egypt of Ibn Khaldun’s own time was already profoundly marked by the spectrum of cultural, institutional and religious phenomena increasingly typical of the post-Mongol Islamic world, it is extremely

¹The relevant bibliography is so vast, only a few representative titles can be mentioned here. One of most striking and readily accessible illustrations of these phenomena, in the case of Islam in China, is S. Chittick’s *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light...* (Albany, SUNY, 2000), soon to be supplemented by the forthcoming Proceedings of the Kyoto conference (2001) on the *Influences of Ibn ‘Arabi in Asia*, which brings together contributions by most of the scholars actively publishing in this area. (Similar conferences on the ‘legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi’ have been held in recent years in Spain, Morocco, Syria and the UK, reflecting at the very least the growing awareness of the ongoing contemporary significance of the issues and opportunities raised by this debate. One of the broadest and most detailed recent volumes, albeit almost exclusively from the standpoint of other Muslim *critics* of these same developments (mostly in recent centuries, despite its title), is *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. de Jong and B. Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999). Finally, a readily accessible recent

important not to limit the referents of the word “Sufi” in our title simply to the phenomena of the increasingly powerful “orders” (*turuq*); to the transformations of the poetic, visual and architectural arts reflecting and inspiring the practices and norms of those “Sufis”; nor even to the more pervasive spread of the multiple forms of popular piety, devotion, festivities, endowments and monuments associated with the role of the saintly “friends of God” (the *awliyā*). In many places the educational and politically critical institutions of Islamic learning and law, and the corresponding norms of religious authority, were also being simultaneously transformed—or at the very least, were the scene of an ongoing series of polemics and struggles for domination—which we can now see reflected in the writings and effective political and institutional efforts of such historically influential later figures as Qaysarī, Jāmī, Mullā Sadrā or Shāh Walīullāh. Now if the eventually lasting influences and domination of these new intellectual and cultural interpretations of Islam, which found their primary inspiration for centuries in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, were not yet clear in Ibn Khaldun’s time, they were certainly prominent enough in the Cairo of his day (and no doubt among the intellectual elite of the Maghreb, as with Ibn al-Khatīb) to form one central target for the ambitious project of intellectual and socio-political reform expressed in his *Muqaddima*.

Against that wider background, it is certainly no accident that so many of the key aims and assumptions of Ibn Khaldun’s project stand out as diametrically opposed to the corresponding positions that were typically closely associated with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi and his subsequent Muslim interpreters. Now the usual intellectual forum for expressing such differences, within the Islamic tradition, was through learned discussions of epistemology, of how we human beings come to know, and what we can know. Formally speaking, of course, those philosophic discussions—on all sides—always managed to arrive at the mutually agreeable assertion of the reality and primacy of “divine prophecy” and its necessarily “revealed” forms of knowing. But that common formal assertion was simply a polite—and safe—way of underlining each party’s radically different and irreconcilable positions concerning the fundamental ***epistemological and political*** question of true religio-political ***authority***: i.e., of who it was *now*—with no divine prophet present—who could actually and reliably interpret that prophetic legacy in terms of *true* humanly accessible and reliable knowledge. Within that context, and

study suggesting many of the dimensions of Mamluk popular and learned Sufism attacked by Ibn

against the conflicting claims first of kalām theologians and then of increasingly pressing representatives of spiritual forms of “knowing”, earlier rationalist Muslim philosophers and scientists—most influentially, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Tufayl and Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī—had already composed a well-known series of treatises, whose key ideas and well-worn rhetorical expressions are taken over almost verbatim by Ibn Khaldūn in both the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* and the *Muqaddima*, designed to demonstrate (i.e., in terms of the norms and procedures of the philosophers) that *only* the intellectual procedures and norms of philosophy could arrive at genuine knowledge—and therefore authoritative interpretation and understanding—of the prophetic legacy. The ways of spiritual purification and asceticism might possibly, in rare cases, coincide with what was knowable philosophically, but again the only reliable and provable way of truly knowing and above all of interpreting and applying such claims was necessarily through the process of philosophical inquiry and reasoning.

In contrast with those familiar philosophic norms accepted and defended by Ibn Khaldun, the underlying models of knowledge, authority, human perfection and the ultimate aims of human endeavor are all radically different in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī and his later interpreters. Since we cannot realistically assume an extensive knowledge of those positions which are the primary targets of Ibn Khaldun’s intellectual criticism of “Sufism”, it may be helpful to mention summarily a few of the most fundamental points of difference underlying Ibn Khaldun’s critique. Simply listing these points is enough to suggest the profound ways in which the philosophic and religious issues at stake go far beyond disputes about particular aspects of those limited social and institutional forms people today normally associate with “Sufism”. The following list, moreover, is simply for illustrative purposes, and should in no way be taken as an exhaustive description of the religious and philosophic matters involved in this dispute:

- A central emphasis in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters is on the absolute universality of the processes of human spiritual life and growth rooted in each person’s necessary awareness of the divine “*Signs in the souls and on the horizons*”. While this process certainly involves relative “ranks” of spiritual realization, its universality is radically opposed to the fundamental distinction of demonstrative

knowledge and mere “opinion” which underlies both the epistemology and the political philosophy of Ibn Khaldun and his philosophical predecessors.

- The process of spiritual development, being universal, is also necessarily and unavoidably *individualistic* and hence radically “democratic”, in the modern sense of that term. In other words, that process of ethical and spiritual purification which is central to *Dīn* (this primordial and universal religious process) necessarily involves all people and proceeds by ascending stages whose forms are individualized and particular in each case. Unlike philosophy and science (as Ibn Khaldun understands them), this individualized “knowing” can neither be “taught” nor “transmitted” according to a scholastic model.
- This process is essentially expressed and grounded, like the divine “ever-renewed creation” that underlies it, in an open-ended diversity, multiplicity, and creativity of expressions.
- Within this process, there is a fundamental role—for all human beings—of aesthetic and spiritually ethical modes of perception, whose roots are necessarily within *each* individual, prior to the intellectual, cultural and logical interpretation and manipulation of those perceptions.
- One basic cultural expression of this epistemology is the central spiritual role, as vehicles for spiritual self-discovery and creative expression, of poetry, music, calligraphy and all the related visual arts.
- On a very practical level, the essential human models, exemplars and facilitators of this process of spiritual perfection are “living and accessible”, but most often *immaterial*, “mediator” figures who are either no longer bodily in this physical world (as with the vast majority of the prophets and saints), or who even in their brief bodily time here are often outwardly almost invisible and even ‘failures’ (as Ibn Khaldun frequently points out) by the usual worldly criteria of social, intellectual or political accomplishment, nobility and inheritance. Even more practically and socially, of course, this central understanding of spiritual mediation was reflected in the eventual

profusion of tomb-shrines, pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) and associated rituals and devotional practices throughout the later Islamic world.

- Intrinsic to this process is the necessary co-existence and intrinsic good of an ever-expanding *multitude* of paths, religious “vehicles”, *awliyā*’ and other spiritual guides, and all the consequent social and cultural expressions of the fundamentally creative spiritual virtue (alluding to the famous “hadith of Gabriel”) of *ihsān*: of first perceiving and then actively manifesting what is truly “good-and-beautiful”.
- Within the perspectives opened up by Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of Islam and its wider philosophic underpinnings developed in his later interpreters, it is clear that the role of *tarīqas* or any other particular set of social and cultural forms can only reflect a very limited expression of this wider divine imperative.
- Within the multiple revelations illuminating this universal process, the necessary role of particular historical and cultural forms such as the languages of revelation lies above all in their relatively limited role in allowing the “decipherment” of the divine “prescriptions” transmitted by the prophets. But that decipherment is itself only the beginning of the active, necessarily creative process—and irrevocably *individual* responsibility—of “translating” those prescriptions into their appropriate and spiritually effective expressions.

This brief catalogue may have one other use beyond helping us to grasp the very fundamental issues underlying Ibn Khaldun’s critique of the more philosophic claims of Ibn ‘Arabi and his fellows. For it also may help to explain just why his own extraordinarily creative and challenging writings—with their thoroughgoing articulation and vigorous polemic defense of the “*Arab*” roots and forms of the cultural and intellectual heritage he sought to renew—apparently failed to find even a minimal foothold in those flourishing, prolific “Eastern” centers of post-Mongol Islamic cultural life which were so profoundly shaped in response to the spread and popularization of those radically contrasting ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi we have just outlined here.

BURNING IBN ‘ARABI’S BOOKS: IBN KHALDUN’S TWOFOLD VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY SUFISM

Ibn Khaldun's profoundly critical attitude toward contemporary Sufi movements, on both the practical, socio-political and theoretical, intellectual planes, is carefully—if somewhat cryptically—summarized in the following *fatwā*:²

The path of the so-called Sufis (*mutasawwifa*) comprises two paths. The first is the path of the Sunna, the path of their forefathers (*salaf*), according to the Book and Sunna, imitating their righteous forefathers among the Companions (of the Prophet) and the Followers.³

The second path, which is contaminated by (heretical) innovations, is the way of a group among the recent thinkers (*muta’akhhirūn*) who make the first path a means to the removal (*kashf*) of the veil of sensation, because that is one of its results. Now among these self-styled Sufis are Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Sab‘īn, Ibn Barraĵān and their followers among those who traveled their way and worshipped according to their (heretical) sect (*nihla*). They have many works filled with pure unbelief and vile innovations, as well as corresponding interpretations of the outward forms (of scripture and practice) in the most bizarre, unfounded and reprehensible ways—such that one who examines them will be astounded at their being related to religion (*al-milla*) or being considered part of the Sharia.

²Reprinted at the end of M. al-Tanjī's edition of the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il fi Tahdhīb al-Masā’il*, (Istanbul, 1958), pp. 110-11; translated here in its entirety. (Many students of Ibn Khaldun, including al-Tanjī, have placed the composition of this otherwise undated text in the years immediately preceding the first stages of writing the *Muqaddima* and the *K. al-Ibar*.)

³Readers who may be struck by the verbal similarity of this passage to Ibn Taymiyya's famous "*salafī*" outlook and criticism of popular Sufism in his time (and to the various permutations of his views in a wide range of modern "reformist" movements) should be cautioned that the resemblance here is simply at a rhetorical level, and that, as we shall see, both the principles and the intentions underlying Ibn Khaldun's criticisms are fundamentally different.

Now the praise of these people by someone is certainly not a proof (of the validity of their views), even if the person praising them has attained whatever excellence he may have attained. For the Book and Sunna are more excellent and a better testimony than anyone.

So as for the legal judgment (*hukm*) concerning these books containing those beliefs which lead (people) astray, and their manuscripts which are found in the hands of the people, such as the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya* of Ibn ‘Arabī, the *Budd* [*al-‘Arif*] by Ibn Sab‘īn, and Ibn Qasī’s *Khal‘ al-Na‘layn*: the judgment concerning these books and their like is that they should all be eliminated wherever they are found, either through burning them in fire or by washing them with water until all trace of the writing is effaced, because of the general positive benefit (*maslaha*) for Religion through effacing unsound beliefs. Therefore it is incumbent on the public authority (*walī al-amr*) to burn these books in order to eliminate the general cause of corruption (which they constitute), and it is incumbent on whoever is able to do so to burn them.

Now this straightforward legal statement of Ibn Khaldun's position as a Maliki *faqīh*, which also summarizes much of his more popular and practically oriented critique of contemporary Maghrebi Sufism in his relatively early *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*, is not that different from the views later expressed, from a more openly philosophic perspective, throughout his more famous *Muqaddima*. In particular, one can already see here (1) his recurrent basic distinction between the wider *practical* political, social and ethical consequences of various forms of Sufism, and their more *theoretical* literary expressions and justifications; and (2) his acknowledgment of the widespread popular appeal and the powerful or learned contemporary defenders of the different forms of Sufism on both those levels. In fact, it is precisely the interplay of these two basic concerns and considerations that explains both the centrality of his critique of Sufism in the *Muqaddima* and the rhetorical ambiguities and subtleties of expression,

regarding particular Sufis and different dimensions of Sufism, that have often puzzled more recent interpreters of that work.

However, since those modern commentators—usually relying on a superficial reading of a few key passages in the *Muqaddima* concerning prophetic epistemology and angelic or mystical inspiration⁴—have often persisted in considering Ibn Khaldun a Sufi or at least a "sympathizer" with some forms of Sufism, the following passage from that work may be helpful in suggesting its fundamental continuity with the attitude and understanding already evident in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*. This passage is particularly important because it occurs in the middle of the section on kinds of "supernatural" knowledge supposedly outlining his "mystical" epistemology, and thereby beautifully illustrates the biting irony and often sardonic humor with which he so often touches on the characteristic practices and claims of Islamic mysticism:⁵

Among the followers of the Sufis are a group of simple fellows (*bahālīl*) and idiots who resemble the insane more than they do rational people, although despite that they do possess the stages of sainthood (*walāya*) and the states of the righteous saints (*siddīqūn*).... These people do not lack rational souls, nor have they been ruined, as with the insane....

Now you should know that the state of these people is sometimes confused with that of the insane.... But there are distinctive signs by which you can distinguish them: One of them is that these simpletons never stop their *dhikr* and acts of worship (*'ibāda*) at all, although they don't do them according to the legally prescribed conditions. Another distinguishing sign is that they were created idiots from the very first, while insanity befalls (previously healthy people) after part of their life....

⁴In the sixth prefatory discussion to chapter I and the prefatory sections of chapter VI on human and prophetic knowledge, as well as the corresponding sections of the chapter on Sufism in chapter VI.

⁵Q I 201-202, in the middle of the sixth "prefatory discussion" in the opening chapter. Textual references to the *Muqaddima*, throughout this paper, are to the old edition of E. M. Quatremère (*Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldun*, Paris, 1858), followed by volume (I-III) and page numbers; translations are our own.

Ibn Khaldun stresses that "the course of our discussion caused us to insert the preceding section" (i.e., immediately after his discussion of claims to mystical knowledge). The length of this essay does not

Another distinguishing sign is the extensiveness of their activity and influence among men, for both good and bad, because they do not have to depend on (legal) permission, because (legal) responsibility (*taklīf*) does not exist for them; but the insane have no (such) influence."

In light of this revealing passage, Ibn Khaldun's manifold criticisms of Sufism, both in its more popular and learned expressions, can all be understood as efforts to limit what he saw as the damage and negative results of this inevitable "foolish" activity, and to channel its unavoidable popular expressions into what he considered to be a more positive and constructive direction.⁶ The following section is therefore devoted to a brief survey of his direct and implicit criticisms of beliefs, practices and religious ideals associated with contemporary Sufi movements. Against that background, we can then go on to explore the apparent contradiction between this typically wide-ranging critical outlook and the supposedly "mystical" elements in his prophetic epistemology, while also considering a few of the earlier attempts at resolving this puzzle. In fact, that contradiction can easily be resolved on the basis of both the clues provided in the *Muqaddima* itself and their historical antecedents in earlier Islamic philosophers. From that philosophic perspective, we can then understand more accurately the actual aims of Ibn Khaldun's critique and the complex interplay between the practical and intellectual facets of his argument and the audiences he was addressing in each case, including the way those aims were also illustrated in what we know of his own life and self-conception. Finally, we have concluded with a few observations concerning the much wider relevance, for all students of the *Muqaddima*, of the rhetorical devices and philosophical intentions illustrated in Ibn Khaldun's multi-faceted criticisms of contemporary Sufism.

IBN KHALDUN'S CRITICISMS OF CONTEMPORARY SUFISM:

The central concern in Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism—just as with his wider critique of other Islamic sciences (e.g., *‘ilm al-kalām*) and educational practices—is in fact

permit us to quote the passage in full, or to point out the recurrent irony and ambiguities in all of his expressions here.

⁶The forms of public and religious "folly" criticized in the *Muqaddima* are certainly not limited to Sufism (compare, for example, Ibn Khaldun's equally critical portrayal of *‘ilm al-kalām*, or of various educational practices of his day), but it is certainly far more frequently the object of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms than any other Islamic science, sect or interpretive tendency.

nothing less than identifying the truly qualified "authorities" for interpreting and applying the Prophetic legacy: i.e., for interpreting it both with regard to popular religious beliefs and practices, and with regard to its potential implications for human beings' ultimate, intellectual perfection and the repertoire of philosophic sciences and associated methods which Ibn Khaldun took to be necessary for achieving that perfection. Thus Ibn Khaldun's constant focus (explicitly in the *Muqaddima*, and less openly in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is on the interplay, in both directions, between what he views as certain dangerous intellectual tendencies in Islamic thought and related wider socio-political developments which can be seen as both "consequences" of and contributing conditions to those unfortunate intellectual movements. That twofold focus is likewise reflected in the central notion of historical "lessons" (*ibar*) in the overall title of his work: those "lessons" are both a form of knowledge *and* knowledge with compelling implications for right action.

Now there can be no doubt that in Ibn Khaldun's time by far the most influential and flourishing competitors with philosophy (as he conceived of it) for this central role as the arbiters and authoritative interpreters of religious revelation, in all the relevant domains, were constituted by Sufi institutions and practices, and by their intellectual expressions and justifications claiming their own philosophic universality and comprehensiveness.⁷ It is no accident, then, if so many of Ibn Khaldun's arguments against contemporary Sufism, in all its manifestations, echo Averroes' earlier vigorous philosophic critiques of Ghazālī and kalām.⁸ And just as with Averroes'

⁷Both the passion and the rhetorical centrality of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of Sufism (whether in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* or the *Muqaddima*) can only be understood against the background of the pervasiveness of "Sufi" themes in both religious literature and practice in his historical milieu. Therefore, as can be seen in many of the illustrations below, the distortions, inaccuracies and omissions in his treatment of Sufism are normally not signs of ignorance of the authors and practices in question, but of certain self-conscious rhetorical (and often polemical) intentions whose critical dimension would be most evident precisely to his contemporary readers well acquainted with the targets of that criticism.

⁸The rhetorical structures of both Averroes' *Decisive Treatise* (with its legalistic presuppositions resembling the procedure of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) and his *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* are especially interesting in this regard. (It is important to keep in mind that the science of kalām in Averroes' own intellectual and political situation, given the recent history of Ibn Tūmart—whose ideology was putatively inspired by Ghazālī—and the Almohads, had something of the wider public significance and impact of Sufi writings in Ibn Khaldun's time.)

An even closer analogy can be seen in Ibn Tūfayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, which revolves around precisely the contrast between the ostensibly "mystical" and rational philosophic understandings of Avicenna's "Oriental Wisdom" and the same intentionally ambiguous treatments of prophetic and

critiques, the fact that Ibn Khaldun often phrases his criticisms in a legalistic form and context should certainly not lead us to view him simply as a "conservative," rigorist defender of the prerogatives and presuppositions of Maliki fiqh, much less of some more radical "traditionalist" (*salafi*) ideal.⁹

The other side of the pervasive spread and influence of Sufi institutions and ideas and their increasing support by political authorities—at least in Ibn Khaldun's Mamluk Egypt¹⁰—was the considerable sensitivity of direct public attacks on those activities, a point which is already suggested implicitly in the defensive tone of parts of the *fatwā* translated above. Not surprisingly, then, Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddima* only rarely alludes openly (as in the long passage quoted above) to what he clearly saw as the tragic waste of scarce public and human resources in the Mamluk support of so many "simpletons" and their dangerously misguided activities. But instead of attempting to convert or suppress such individuals and institutions directly, his critical intentions in the *Muqaddima* are usually conveyed on a more learned, literary level either by allusions to reprehensible "excesses" or "heresies"—especially *Shiite* ones¹¹—which the attentive reader could easily apply to contemporary Sufi movements and writings, or by the *pointed omission* or *ironic inversion* of standard Sufi interpretations and citations (especially of hadith or Qur'anic passages favored by Sufi authors) which he could

mystical epistemology in Avicenna's works which have led to such recurrent misunderstandings of Ibn Khaldun's intentions.

⁹In fact, one could argue that the primary *practical* aim of the *Muqaddima* is not simply a reform of the science of "history", but rather a more fundamental rethinking of the presuppositions and aims of Islamic Law.

¹⁰Since Ibn Khaldun was apparently writing before the widespread institutionalization of popular "maraboutism" in the Maghreb, the relative openness of his criticisms of Sufism in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and the *fatwā* cited above may not be unrelated to the relative lack in the Islamic West of a socio-political "establishment" of Sufi institutions and ideas comparable to the situation in Mamluk Egypt. The widespread public support and institutionalization of Sufi thought and practice in Egypt, frequently alluded to in Ibn Khaldun's autobiography and in the *Muqaddima*, is of course substantiated by a wide range of historical sources already for several preceding centuries.

¹¹Ghazali's Seljuq-sponsored anti-Fatimid polemic writings and Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Imami/"Mongol" polemics provide two other dramatic and accessible illustrations of this longstanding rhetorical pattern of using ostensibly anti-"Shiite" criticisms—in writings intended for an almost universally Sunni class of learned scholars—as a powerful indirect means of sharply criticizing more familiar and powerful developments in their own respective socio-political milieus. Modern interpreters of Ibn Khaldun have rarely even suggested the pervasiveness of this familiar rhetorical procedure in his *Muqaddima*.

assume to be familiar to most of his educated readers. Those religious and legal scholars who could grasp those allusions and their deeper motivations, Ibn Khaldun seems to have assumed, could also eventually be counted on to help channel the inevitable activity of the mass of "simpletons" in a more positive direction.

Once one becomes aware of this recurrent rhetorical procedure and its underlying principles and presuppositions—all of which are unfortunately almost invisible to modern readers unfamiliar with the work's wider literary and cultural background—it turns out that the *Muqaddima* is permeated by a fascinating play of sardonic humor and irony, of constantly ambiguous, potentially critical expressions in which there are few "chance" or simply "objective" phrases.¹² Thus, as in the representative case of his treatment of Ibn 'Arabi, what may appear to us to be merely innocent "summaries" or uncontroversial historical observations frequently turn out to be intentional misrepresentations or pointedly self-conscious suggestions of "guilt by association" whose rhetorical character—and more immediate practical intentions and motivations—were no doubt readily apparent to most of Ibn Khaldun's educated readers. This is especially evident in his recurrent polemic accusations of "Shiite" influences or tendencies, a handy scapegoat which—quite apart from any question of its historical validity in each case—frequently allows him to criticize indirectly central features or intellectual underpinnings of Sufi movements and activities in his own immediate environment.¹³

IBN KHALDUN'S *DIRECT* CRITICISMS OF SUFISM:

The relatively open and explicit objects of Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism (or of its ostensibly "Shiite" counterparts) can be summarized under the following five points. In each of these cases (with the partial exception of the third category), it is worth noting that the target of his criticism appears to be much less the "truth" and theoretical validity of the belief or activity in question—whether by traditional religious criteria, or with regard to

¹²Again, this approach is by no means limited to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism, and is equally evident in his treatment of subjects relevant to our understanding and application of *fiqh* or *kalām*, for example.

¹³In addition to the earlier Sunni precedents mentioned above, we may note in passing the very similar way later leading Iranian philosophers under the Shiite Safavid dynasty and its successors down to the present day have typically used vehement attacks on the notoriously "Sunni" *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn

demonstrative philosophic norms—than what he implies are the *dangerous practical social and political effects* of such beliefs in the society around him.

(1) One of the most common targets of Ibn Khaldun's criticism is the belief in a “Mahdi” (or other related forms of messianism), typified in his long section (Q II 142-201) debunking both the hadith foundations of that belief and its further development in Shiite and Sufi contexts.¹⁴ The main aim of his criticisms there is not so much the intellectual pretensions underlying that belief, as it is the recurrent political delusions flowing from the popular spread of such ideas among the "common people, the stupid mass", which have led so many Mahdist pretenders—both sincere and fraudulent—into fruitless uprisings and revolts without any hope of successful and lasting political consequences.¹⁵ Typically enough, Ibn Khaldun elsewhere stresses the critical importance of closely related messianic beliefs in the successful political efforts of both Muhammad and the later Fatimid Shiites, and even acknowledges the sincerity and sound ethical intentions of certain Mahdist figures closer to his own time. Clearly his primary intention in such passages—in light of those earlier "successes" and notorious "failures" (as well as his own repeatedly unsuccessful youthful political undertakings)—is to draw the attention of the thoughtful and attentive reader to the indispensable practical, political and intellectual preconditions of any effective and lasting political activity and reforms.

(2) A second basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's critique is his denial, which is more often implicit than explicit (except with regard to Shiism), of the existence of the “Pole” (*qutb*) and

al-Rāzī as a thinly veiled criticism of comparable outlooks and ideas among the increasingly powerful and intolerant Shiite clergy in their own milieu.

¹⁴*Muqaddima*, Q II 142-201, summarized at II 171: Such beliefs and deluded actions are all based on "juggling of words, imagined things (*ashyā' takhyīliyya*) and astrological judgments", so that "the lives of the first and the last of them are all wasted in this (nonsense)." Here, even before the separate chapter on Sufism, Ibn Khaldun already attempts to derive all the typical notions of "modern" (contemporary) Sufism from earlier "extremist" Shiism (Q II 164-172), focusing in each case on the common *ideological* function of each religious idea in terms of its popular political implications and effects. Thus, for example, the metaphysics of "union" (*wahda*) is treated here solely as a theological justification for the idea of divine "incarnation" (*hulūl*) ostensibly claimed by the Imams (and presumably by later Sufi saints); the belief in the spiritual hierarchy of the saints (*qutb*, *abdāl* and other *awliyā'*) is related back to Alid claims for the *nuqabā'*; Ali's spiritual superiority to the other Companions is reduced to simply another *political* claim; and the science of letters (*jafr*) and astrology are treated only in light of the usefulness of their "predictions" (whether sincere or simply as propaganda) for political purposes.

¹⁵See the representative cases cited at Q II 172-176, which so strikingly resemble many more familiar recent "Mahdist" movements throughout the Islamic world.

other members of the spiritual hierarchy,¹⁶ and—what is again more practically important—his constant care to avoid any allusion to the relevance or necessity of living saints or spiritual intermediaries as guides to the awareness and understanding of the ultimate ends of religion and revelation.¹⁷ The absence of any allusion to such widespread claims and associated religious practices is all the more striking in that some such belief seems to have been almost universal in Ibn Khaldun's own society—underlying the public respect, at least in Egypt, for the saints and popularly esteemed "holy men" manifested by most political authorities of the day—, without any necessary contradiction of the authority and competence of the learned scholars of the religious law within their own limited domain. In Ibn Khaldun, this silence cannot be explained by some *salafī*-type abhorrence of "innovation" and fantasized notion of the perfection and eternal adequacy of the outward expressions of the original revelation, since he goes to great pains, in both the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and the *Muqaddima*, to stress the necessity of a rightly guided historical evolution and adaptation of the revelation in order to realize the concrete, this-worldly "benefits" (*masālih*) intended by the prophetic Lawgiver. The corresponding claims of many charismatic Sufis—or the popularly assumed powers of so many deceased prophets and saints—to provide such guidance and insight in the spiritual realm are not really criticized so much as they are totally, and quite intentionally, *passed over in silence*.

(3) The third recurrent object of Ibn Khaldun's criticism—although here that term is perhaps too mild, in light of the book-burning unambiguously prescribed in his *fatwā* quoted above—are all the philosophizing and intellectual tendencies in later Sufi thought.¹⁸ Not only

¹⁶See note 13 above for his repeated references to the supposed "Shiite" and "extremist" (*ghulāt*) origins of such beliefs.

¹⁷In his discussion of the role of the Sufi shaykh in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, Ibn Khaldun carefully sticks to the question of the practical need for such an individual guide in maintaining the disciple's psychic equilibrium, and makes no mention at all of any wider social, political or religious functions or authoritative claims of saints or spiritually perfected individuals (apart from the Prophet and Companions).

¹⁸Q III 65-79, where Ibn Khaldun briefly discusses the—in his view, both philosophically and religiously unsound—intellectual views on ontology and cosmology of "modern" Sufi thinkers and poets (including notably the famous Egyptian mystical poet Ibn al-Fārid), in light of both scientific knowledge and "sound" religious belief. His summary division here into Sufi schools of divine "Self-manifestation" (*tajalli*) and "Union" (*wahda*) may also allude to Ibn Taymiyya's earlier critiques of many of the same "modern" Sufis. As in the *fatwā* quoted at the beginning of this essay, he carefully distinguishes in this passage the irreparable *intellectual* and theological errors of these writers from the politically more useful, or at least tolerable, *practical* and pietistic aspects of Sufi "folly."

does he carefully avoid quoting any of those influential works directly, although their more poetic and popular religious expressions were almost certainly familiar to all his educated readers, but the terms in which he does allude to them (and to their authors, such as Ibn ‘Arabi) are carefully designed to dissuade any reader who might otherwise be tempted to find them intellectually and philosophically interesting. In this particular case, at least, Ibn Khaldun's hostility and thoroughgoing misrepresentation can hardly be explained simply by the supposed practical dangers and implications of such recondite texts. Rather, he goes out of his way to avoid the suggestion of any intellectual, philosophic alternative to his own Peripatetic ontological and epistemological premises which are repeatedly presented throughout the *Muqaddima*, and in summary form at the beginning of the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*.

(4) A fourth basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism involves his repeated emphatic discussion of it (and especially of later, relatively contemporary Sufī writers) in the context of magic, astrology and sorcery—i.e., either of deluded prediction of future events or of external, this-worldly wonders or miracles worked by saints and holy men. Again, what is practically most important here is not whether Ibn Khaldun really thinks that all such "supernatural" phenomena are in fact frauds, products of chance, or the result of sound practical wisdom and insight.¹⁹ What is really crucial, as with the preceding point, is what is left out: i.e., the unsuspecting reader is intentionally left with the highly misleading impression that such activities are in fact central aims and practices of Sufism or at least somehow encouraged and justified by later Sufī writings, while the author could easily have cited hundreds of Sufī works

It is worth noting that his intellectual criticism of these "moderns" and their dangerous confounding of religious beliefs and philosophy is paralleled by his equally vociferous, if perhaps slightly more subtle, attacks (following Averroes) on any intellectual pretensions of post-Ghazalian *kalām* in the immediately preceding section of chapter VI. The order of presentation and the historical analysis offered here strongly suggest that he—like Ibn Tufayl and Averroes before him—considered Ghazālī (through his monumental *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*) largely responsible for the subsequent spread and eventual respectability of these later Sufī mixtures of philosophy and theology in Sunni Islam.

¹⁹In fact, Ibn Khaldun, following Avicenna's classical philosophic treatment of such questions in the closing chapters of his *Ishārāt*, does go out of his way to eliminate both the necessity and even the possibility of any "supernatural" explanations of such activities, while stressing the great *political* importance of popular *belief* in them. Note the typical illustration of his bitingly ironic discussion of the "mystical unveiling" (*kashf*) of Ja‘far al-Sādiq in accurately foreseeing the failure of Alid uprisings against the Umayyads (at Q II 184); or his sarcastic remark at Q II 246 that astrologers "only give us the celestial cause for that, but they have yet to give us the *earthly* reason—which is what we've just mentioned concerning...."

(including especially the particular "heretical" books explicitly condemned in his own *fatwā*) criticizing such pretensions and bringing out the true aims and presuppositions of the spiritual life as developed at length in the Qur'an and hadith. Again, there is no sign that Ibn Khaldun's stress on this aspect of Sufism and popular religious belief is motivated by any salafi-like desire to "reform" Islamic spirituality by eliminating such popular and magical innovations. Instead, what is eliminated here—no doubt quite successfully—is any suspicion of an intellectually and philosophically serious alternative to Ibn Khaldun's own understanding of Islamic philosophy and religion.

(5) A final recurrent theme in Ibn Khaldun's criticism of contemporary Sufism (and in fact the central theme in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is its supposed development of ways of life and practices involving a dangerous departure from what he portrays as the unreflective, active piety of the original Muslim community and—most importantly for his own time—its alleged separation of conscientious religious and ethical life from active participation in the wider socio-economic and political life of society. This dangerous separation is typified, for him, by such typical later Sufi practices as *dhikr* and *samā'* (as opposed to supererogatory prayer and Qur'an recitation), initiation (the *khirqā*) and the initiatic role of the Sufi shaykhs (again accused of Shiite origins), and the institutionalization of Sufi centers and foundations (*khānegahs*, *zāwiyas*, tomb-shrines of and pilgrimage centers for saintly figures, etc.). Once again, a closer look at Ibn Khaldun's discussions of such "innovations" reveals that it is not really the religious departure from the unreflective, active piety of the Companions that he is criticizing—since he gives cogent natural and historical reasons why such social and ethical differentiation had to take place in any case—but rather the much more practical and down-to-earth consequences of diverting substantial societal and human resources to the pointless, imaginary distractions and pastimes of such large groups of "simpletons," and the perhaps even more debilitating long-range consequences of their attempting to lead a moral and religious life somehow separate from what they allegedly viewed as the "corrupting" sphere of political and military power and authority.

IBN KHALDUN'S INDIRECT CRITICISMS OF SUFISM:

With regard to each of these criticisms, however, what is even more striking in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism (whether "early" or "later") and its underpinnings in the Qur'an and hadith is precisely what he does *not* mention: i.e., his careful, often pointedly ironical

omission of the fundamental scriptural themes and passages which were popularly understood to support the typically Sufi (and often more generally Islamic) forms of contemporary spiritual practice and interpretation, and his equally specific focus on the things Muhammad and his Companions said and did which can instead be explained entirely in terms of political leadership and insight, practical wisdom and exclusively *this-worldly* ends. The following is only a representative selection of a few such important passages from the *Muqaddima*, concentrating on examples clearly involving implicit criticism of key contemporary Sufi tenets or practices.

The first, and perhaps the most ironic illustration of this typical rhetorical device occurs at the very beginning of the book, in Ibn Khaldun's invocation of the Prophet as "...him for whose birth *the existing world* was in labor before...."²⁰ In this single brief phrase—which the unsuspecting reader might initially tend to take as a stock allusion to the common Sufi belief in the pre-eternity of the "Muhammadan Reality"²¹ or Perfect Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—Ibn Khaldun actually manages to insist on both the normal humanity of Muhammad and, more importantly, on what he understands to be the fundamental philosophic thesis of the eternity and stable, causally determined structure of the present world-order, which is the essential basis of the rest of his new science and of the philosophic sciences in general. For the philosopher, what he says here is of course *equally* true of each and every natural being in that world order, by no means just Muhammad!

A similarly trenchant irony is evident in Ibn Khaldun's striking claim near the beginning of his book (Q I 66) that "God inspired us with this (new science) through divine inspiration (*ilhāman*), and He led us (in discovering and presenting it)," an assertion no doubt ironically echoing the widespread claim of many Sufis—perhaps most influentially in the key writings of Ibn 'Arabi—to special divine inspiration and validation for their works and spiritual insights. However, Ibn Khaldun's own philosophic understanding of the very different (i.e., true and false!) forms of "inspiration" in question, following Avicenna, is gradually made clearer in his

²⁰Q I 2; emphasis ours.

²¹As expressed in such widely circulated hadith—both in Sufi circles and in popular Islamic literature more generally—as "Were it not for you (Muhammad), I [God] would not have created the spheres" (*lawlāka...*) and "I [Muhammad] was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay". The most extensive Sufi development of this idea is of course to be found throughout the works of Ibn 'Arabi,

Muqaddima (see our discussion of his epistemology below), until he himself stresses the universality and practical necessity of this sort of extremely *non*-mystical "inspiration" (i.e., as the source of middle terms in *all* human reasoning) for all scientific inquiry, at III 256-257.

Even more evident—and likewise emphasized already in the opening invocation of the book (Q I 2)—is Ibn Khaldun's single-minded focus on the factors of political success and group solidarity in Muhammad's prophecy. Among other things, that focus leads him to pass over in absolute silence the extensive body of Qur'anic verses and hadith stressing Muhammad's (and other prophets' and saints') special "closeness" (*qurba*) to God and all the related spiritual virtues and realization which, in the prevailing Sufi conception, formed the common bond between the prophets and the *awliyā'* (the "saints" or "Friends of God"), and which constituted the spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā'* as the authoritative spiritual interpreters of the Prophetic legacy in the Muslim community.²²

Not only does Ibn Khaldun studiously ignore the comprehensive presence of such themes throughout the Qur'an and hadith, but he even repeatedly goes out of his way to explain away apparent criticisms of this world and the quest for political authority by Muhammad and the early Imams (Q I 364-367; Q II 107), focusing instead on a solitary and unusual hadith insisting that "God sent no prophet who did not enjoy the protection of [or: wealth among] his people."²³ Passing over in silence the host of extremely well-known hadith suggesting the contrary and the multitude of Qur'anic (not to mention other scriptural and historical) references to prophets and saints—Muhammad included—who were rejected and despised precisely *by* their own people,

whose writings—condemned to public burning in Ibn Khaldun's *fatwā* quoted at the beginning of this essay—served as the basis for most subsequent elaborations of this theme.

²²Ibn Khaldun takes up the connection of *qurba* and *walāya* only once and very briefly in his section on Sufism—without any reference to the Prophet at all—and there carefully avoids mentioning any metaphysical or spiritual significance of such notions.

²³The same rare hadith is repeated *three more times* at I, 168, 268, 364! The powerful and indeed often intentionally shocking effect of Ibn Khaldun's use and personal selection of hadith throughout his *Muqaddima* can only be appreciated in light of what is in fact the overwhelming denigration of attachment to this world and to the pursuit of power and wealth in it throughout the Qur'an and the canonical hadith collections, not to mention the central elaboration of those same spiritual themes in later Sufi tradition.

Ibn Khaldun repeatedly reminds his readers of those recurrent factors which visibly do account for the worldly *political* success or failure of *any* "prophet" or would-be leader and reformer.²⁴

Another particularly significant case of this typical ironic approach to the widespread Sufi understanding of key hadith and Qur'anic passages—both in what Ibn Khaldun openly emphasizes and in what he fails to mention—is his peculiar use of the famous hadith that begins: "I was given six things (not given to any prophet before me)...."²⁵ What is important in its wider polemic context is not simply that Ibn Khaldun mentions *only one* of those six things, the *jawāmi' al-kalim* (which he pointedly takes to refer only to Muhammad's effectively unmatched Arabic rhetorical gifts and influence), but that his interpretation is again an unmistakable and absolute rejection of Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the "Muhammadan Reality" as the eternal spiritual totality of the noetic divine "Words" manifested in the various prophets (and saints), both in its intellectual expressions and in its far-reaching practical spiritual consequences.

The purpose of religious Law, Ibn Khaldun insists (at Q I 352) is "not to provide blessings," but rather to promote specific (this-worldly) public interests (*masālih*), which, as a jurist, he takes pain to identify concretely in this and many other instances of Prophetic prescriptions. His major argument for the superiority of religious laws over "governmental, restraining laws" (at Q II 126-128) has to do purely and simply with their practical efficacy, without any mention of their spiritual or other-worldly ends: they are more effective because of the popular belief in posthumous rewards and punishments, and because of their "more

²⁴In fact, the same criteria of political, worldly success are explicitly applied to saints and religious figures as to would-be political reformers in general: e.g., at Q I 286-290, with regard to Ibn Qasī and other religious reformers, as well as "deluded" Berbers claiming to be the Mahdi; at Q I 390-391, Ibn Khaldun stresses that the same (politico-religious) "delusions" were shared by Husayn, in his attitude toward Yazīd. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun never even mentions the fundamental religious conception (shared by Sufis and many other Muslim groups) that the properly religious function of saints and other spiritual guides—quite apart from their visible reforms and political aims—lies in their witnessing, often precisely through their "lost causes", to the reality of the immortality of the soul and the afterlife, thereby pointing to the eternal importance of caring properly for the soul despite all worldly temptations and obstacles.

²⁵This hadith is quoted and commented repeatedly by Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, and was no doubt at least vaguely familiar (in that context) to most of Ibn Khaldun's educated readers. The same sort of heavy irony is of course constantly present in Ibn Khaldun's characteristic exclusively this-worldly use, throughout the *Muqaddima*, of Qur'anic verses usually understood in a spiritual and other-worldly manner, even without reference to any explicitly "Sufi" framework of interpretation.

comprehensive" popular inculcation as an unconscious moral habitus, rather than through each individual's rational calculation or fear.

A particularly important and revealing passage (at Q I 403-404) is Ibn Khaldun's admission that some "men mentioned in Qushayrī's *Risāla*" may be considered among the true "heirs" of the Prophet alluded to in the famous hadith that "the learned (‘*ulamā*’) are the heirs of the prophets." Now later Sufī writers and apologists, including Ibn ‘Arabi, had gone to great lengths to show that the genuine Sufī saints (*awliyā*’), and not the knowledgeable legal scholars, were the "learned" heirs in question. So the inattentive reader could easily take Ibn Khaldun's reference to Qushayrī here (and in a similar passage earlier in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) as a defense of that central Sufī claim.²⁶ But in fact, a moment's attention to the larger context of this statement in the *Muqaddima* makes it clear that (a) he is actually praising only the Companions' and early Muslims' restricting their "religion" simply to unreflective practice, a pure moral *habitus* (without any deeper claim to universal spiritual or theoretical knowledge); and (b) the *habitus* he describes has little or nothing to do with particularly "spiritual" virtues or corresponding practices, but a great deal to do with the communal qualities and powerful “group feeling” (‘*asabīya*’: definitely not in *any* Qur’anic or other traditional list of spiritual virtues!) that help explain the worldly political success of the early Arab-Islamic community.

In order to drive this point home and dispel any possible pietistic and spiritual misconceptions of the explicitly non-spiritual "virtues" he has in mind, Ibn Khaldun repeatedly chooses to cite the father of al-Hajjāj Ibn Yūsuf (at Q I 46-48 and 231-232) as a model of this peculiar sort of internalized religious "knowledge." Once again, the ironic significance of this particular illustration can only be grasped against the background of the widespread popular (and by no means exclusively Sufī) conception of al-Hajjāj—whose life and successful political activity does exemplify many of the practical political insights at the heart of Ibn Khaldun's concern—as something of an exemplar of the unbridled injustice and arbitrary cruelty that had come to be popularly associated in Islamic learned traditions (not without some reason!) with

²⁶Likewise, three further references to "men mentioned by Qushayrī", in the chapter on Sufism (at Q III 64, 67, and 79), all turn out to be thinly veiled criticisms of fundamental concerns and presuppositions of contemporary Sufism—as indeed of many of the later renowned Sufi saints mentioned by Qushayrī as well!

almost all ruling political authorities. This is indeed one of the more recognizably ‘Machiavellian’ passages in the entire *Muqaddima*.

Another especially revealing passage is Ibn Khaldun's treatment (at Q II 96ff.) of the central Islamic theme of injustice (*zulm*), which he carefully and pointedly restricts to the political actions and consequences of rulers, going out of his way to deny the legal applicability of this concept to other individuals. Not only does he pass over the repeated Qur’anic discussions of "injustice" precisely with regard to each human *soul's relation to itself*, which is one of the fundamental bases of spiritual practice, whether Sufi or otherwise. But his discussion of the supposed lack of religious "detering punishments" for that sort of unseen, inner psychic injustice in Islamic law even more revealingly leaves out of account the whole central Qur’anic question of our rewards and punishments—precisely for such inner, socially invisible "actions"—in the next world. Indeed Ibn Khaldun's continuous studied *silence* on the eschatological, post-mortem dimensions of the soul and human being²⁷ certainly goes to the heart of his repeated criticisms of later Sufism and the broadly Neoplatonic philosophic currents with which Sufi philosophizing (like much Shiite spiritual thought) was often associated.

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of singing and music (Q II 352-361) as the “*last*” craft to develop in civilization—rather than as one of the primordial expressions and realizations of humanity’s spiritual nature and origin—is again a most revealing sign not so much of any religio-legalistic opposition to music or its "innovative" uses in Sufi practice,²⁸ as of a more essential philosophic deafness to realms of meaning and *cognitive* dimensions of beauty or harmony (whether musical or otherwise) which did not easily fit into his own conception of philosophy, but which—as was highlighted in our initial summary of key points in the thought of

²⁷I.e., as actual realities, and not simply (as at Q II 126-128, and more generally, wherever he discusses this subject) as *popular beliefs*, on the level of imagination (not of genuine knowledge), reinforcing the deterrent functions of this-worldly rewards and punishments and encouraging the popular practice of and obedience to established religious precepts.

²⁸While Ibn Khaldun has failed to include a separate chapter on music in his discussion of the quadrivium (among the philosophic sciences), there is no indication that his omission in this case flows from any particular religio-legal position against music as such. Of course, as illustrated by Ibn Taymiyya's attacks on the Sufi practice of *samā'*, among others, there were plenty of deeply rooted traditional legal precedents for such criticisms of music (as for similar religio-ethical criticisms of Arabic poetry, which he also carefully avoids mentioning), if he had wished to emphasize that particular point.

Ibn 'Arabī and his interpreters—constituted one of the central appeals of Sufi thought and metaphysics in both its speculative and more poetical, popular expressions.

Finally, Ibn Khaldun's pervasive hostility to Sufism extends even to his ostensibly "aesthetic" judgments on Arabic mystical poetry, as in his remark (at Q III 339) that "to the degree that a poem gets closer to nonsense, it is further from the level of eloquence, since they are two extremes. Because of this [i.e., *because it is nonsense*] poetry on divine and prophetic matters (*rabbāniyyāt wa nubuwwāt*) is generally not very accomplished." This is also, he goes on to add, because it deals with commonplaces "spread among the masses (*al-jumhūr*)."²⁹ Here it is interesting that his criticisms about the "triteness" of such poems and their "lack of sense" really translate his own attitude toward their *contents*, rather than their aesthetic qualities, since such criteria would in fact apply much more strongly to most of the Arabic poetical genres he goes on to discuss at such length and often with informed passion. Again, we may note his careful avoidance of even citing such Arabic mystical poetry in this literary section, although it was probably far more influential in popular religious devotional practice than the learned Sufi treatises he wanted to have burned.²⁹

THE APPARENT "CONTRADICTION": IBN KHALDUN'S PROPHETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

In light of the pervasive presence of this critical reaction to contemporary Sufism throughout the *Muqaddima*, what is no doubt most surprising is not that a few modern writers have persisted in presenting Ibn Khaldun as a "Sufi" or mystical sympathizer—a view which at least does have a certain textual basis in his work—but rather that so many modern commentators have treated the entire subject of Sufism as at best only a marginal detail, limited

²⁹The only mention of particular Arabic mystical poets at all is the brief, disdainful allusion to Ibn al-Fārid and two other more minor figures (including Ibn 'Arabi's student al-Tilimsānī) at Q III 69 and 72, in the context of Ibn Khaldun's general dismissal—closely echoing Ibn Taymiyya—of the heretical, "crypto-Shiite" notions of pantheistic "union" and "incarnation" supposedly permeating their works. (It is difficult to know whether or not this relative silence is a concession to—or at least an indirect acknowledgement of—the widespread popularity in Cairo of a poet like Ibn al-Fārid.)

Apart from this one exception, it is remarkable that Ibn Khaldun, in his long discussion of Arabic poetry, does seem largely to abandon the characteristic combination of religious and philosophic categories applied to all the other preceding Islamic and Arabic arts and sciences in favor of more autonomous (and adequate) aesthetic and descriptive criteria. This is worth noting, also, because the philosophic commentaries of Averroes, for example, did offer him a model of a more vigorously ethical,

to the handful of sections explicitly devoted to that subject. Of course, just as with the similarly widespread neglect of the fundamental place of classical Islamic philosophy in all of Ibn Khaldun's work (despite the comprehensive study of that dimension by Muhsin Mahdi), this oversight can be only explained by a more general historical ignorance, in this case, of the central socio-political role of "Sufi" conceptions and practices in the understanding of Islam throughout all levels of Islamic society, from the Maghreb to southeast and central Asia, during Ibn Khaldun's time—an ignorance largely due to the radically different social and intellectual problematic assumed by most modern Muslim thinkers encountering Ibn Khaldun. But if, as we are suggesting, the *Muqaddima* must largely be understood as a complex, ongoing debate between the very different opposing conceptions of Islam—on all the relevant levels of theory and practice—implied by Ibn Khaldun's own Aristotelian philosophy and by the more influential Sufi thinkers (such as Ibn 'Arabī) whose works he wished to eliminate, then one can only wonder what is left when *neither* side of that primary discussion is adequately taken into account.

In any event, some more attentive readers have at least remarked on the apparent contradiction between the recurrent criticisms of contemporary Sufism which we have noted in Ibn Khaldun's *fatwā*, parts of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and most of the *Muqaddima*—a thoroughly critical attitude which is fully corroborated by what we know of his life and autobiography—and what would initially seem to be a quite positive appreciation and acceptance of mystical and prophetic spiritual knowledge, apparently going “beyond” what can be known by purely rational and demonstrative means, in the two complementary discussions of prophetic epistemology and its ontological underpinnings at the beginning of Chapters I and VI of the *Muqaddima*. Now it is important to stress that the contradiction here, if one reads these epistemological sections in a naive and uninformed way, is really quite glaring and unavoidable. It is not just a sort of personal moral or practical inconsistency, as though Ibn Khaldun (like so many other religious and philosophic thinkers) had himself simply failed to carry out in his own life something which he had allowed in theory. In fact, on the one hand he does clearly seem to suggest the wider possibility of some kind of supra-rational inspired knowledge and spiritual "unveiling" (*kashf*), while on the other hand he misses no occasion to combat any and every theoretical claim and

political and rhetorical approach to Arabic poetry, which Ibn Khaldun had in fact applied to other

practical attempt to realize and act on claims to such privileged spiritual knowledge. Before going on to outline a more adequate interpretation of these passages and their intentions, it may be helpful to examine briefly two earlier detailed attempts at actually resolving this seeming contradiction.³⁰

Miya Syrier, in a long article on "Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Mysticism,"³¹ attempted a chronological explanation of the problem, based in part on a study of the different recensions of the *Muqaddima*. Ibn Khaldun's intellectual interest in Sufi thought and his "undeniable leanings toward Absolute Monism," according to this theory, came mainly later in his life, during his stay in Egypt, and therefore remained largely on the theoretical plane. Apparently he did not have the time or sufficient motivation to carry out that interest in practice or in an appropriate revision of the earlier, more rationalistic and Aristotelian views which (the author admits) are also so evident in other parts of his work. There is no sign that this commentator was even aware of the complex and intentionally ambiguous traditional treatment of these questions by Avicenna and Tūsī (and among earlier Islamic philosophers more generally) which provided the immediate background for Ibn Khaldun's discussions of prophetic and mystical epistemology.³²

Eric Chaumont's subsequent thesis on the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and Ibn Khaldun's "critique of philosophy"³³ developed an even more radical position. Systematically taking issue with the

(especially religious) forms of Arabic literature in a number of earlier passages.

³⁰Alexander Knysh, in chapter 7 ("Ibn 'Arabī in the Muslim West") of his *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1999) deals in greater detail with the case of Ibn Khaldun's famous friend and mentor, the Granadan vizier Ibn al-Khatīb, stressing the concrete political dangers associated with contemporary Sufi movements and writing in the Maghreb. While that political context does vividly illustrate Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of the popular effects of Sufi ideas (already discussed above), we find little evidence that those particular events somehow led Ibn Khaldun to adopt an attitude of prudential concealing of his real positive interest in Sufi thought, as Prof. Knysh sometimes seems to suggest.

³¹*Islamic Culture* 21 (1947), pp. 264-302. (The essay does not deal directly with the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*.)

³²See the epistemological discussions below.

³³Summarized in "La voie du soufisme selon Ibn Khaldūn: présentation et traduction du prologue et du premier chapitre du *Shifā' al-Sā'il*," *Révue philosophique du Louvain* 87 (1989), pp. 264-296. Some of the author's main ideas were more briefly developed in an earlier "Note" on "Ibn Khaldūn et al-Ghazālī: *Fiqh* et *Tasawwuf*" published in *Studia Islamica* LXIV (1986), pp. 151-157. This work is cited here only as perhaps the most extreme and elaborate version of what remains still probably the most common description of Ibn Khaldun's approach to both Sufism and Islamic philosophy in most popular

arguments and broader interpretations of Muhsin Mahdi,³⁴ he maintained that Ibn Khaldun, like Ghazali, was in fact a Sufi and devout Muslim believer who totally rejected all the claims and approaches of the Islamic philosophers; hence his "refutation of the philosophers" in chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* is to be taken in a literal and absolute sense. In this view, any apparent traces of a philosophic outlook in the *Muqaddima* have to do only with the narrower heuristic assumptions of historical science, but Ibn Khaldun personally believed in the superiority of Islamic revelation and spiritual inspiration on all planes, going beyond what could ever be given by philosophy in every respect. Needless to say, the thoughtful reader is left wondering why this Ibn Khaldun apparently failed to act on his own supposedly positive view of Sufism, why he devoted so much energy to actually criticizing Sufism in virtually all its contemporary manifestations, and why he demonstrated such a great interest in the repeated, and usually quite positive, restatement of the far-reaching claims, premises and methods of the Islamic philosophers throughout the *Muqaddima* (and indeed already in summary form in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*).

Our own hypothesis is that these apparent contradictions can be readily resolved in light of what Ibn Khaldun himself assumes—and carefully explains in many other places in his *Muqaddima*—concerning (1) the basic distinction between the distinctively human *theoretical*, speculative understanding (with its corresponding sciences and intellectual methods) and the manifold *practical* and deliberative functions of reason; and (2) the necessarily complex relations between the latter and the universal political and ethical functions of "revelation" with regard to grounding belief and practice of the religious Law.³⁵ In fact, as illustrated in the following section, the resolution of this contradiction also clearly reveals the essential interconnection between the explicit "theoretical" contributions and clarifications provided by Ibn Khaldun's new

and historical discussions of the *Muqaddima*, including those in most historical surveys of Islamic philosophy.

³⁴Most elaborately developed in his *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, (Chicago, 1957), still the most thorough and profound study of Ibn Khaldun's thought and intentions in the *Muqaddima*.

³⁵The best summary account of these fundamental issues is to be found in the two related articles by M. Mahdi in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, (Wiesbaden, 1963), pp. 888-904 and 961-984; detailed documentation of those perspectives in the *Muqaddima* itself is to be found throughout the same author's book-length study cited in the preceding note.

science of society in the *Muqaddima* and the more problematic question of the practical aims and motivations of those reforms.

However, the possibility of resolving those apparent contradictions, as Ibn Khaldun himself points out, also depends on two or three basic abilities or predispositions which were certainly not shared by all of his potential readers. The first of these is close attention to the seven valid reasons which he carefully outlines for why someone would ever bother to write a *scientific* book in the first place.³⁶ The second key ability, and certainly the most important, is what he describes as the distinctively human ability to think "several steps ahead",³⁷ an ability which is certainly required if one is to grasp the reasons underlying the many apparent contradictions or non-sequiturs which are intentionally spread throughout the *Muqaddima*, on virtually every page. And the indispensable third factor, at least for readers who would want to pursue the multiple suggestions in the *Muqaddima* concerning the true intellectual perfection of human beings, would be some acquaintance with the writings of earlier Islamic philosophers,³⁸

³⁶Q III 242-248 (ch. VI, section 32). This section opens with a critically important reiteration of the Aristotelian epistemology underlying Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the universality and uniformity of the philosophic sciences and the reasons for the contrasting diversity of the religious and historical sciences. (The clearest earlier exposition of these principles is at Q II 385-386.) While Ibn Khaldun's illustrations of these sound reasons for writing a scientific work are taken from non-philosophic, religious literatures, all of his first six reasons are directly applicable to his own justifications and motivations for composing the *Muqaddima* and, more revealingly, to his understanding of this "new science" in its relation to the pre-existing philosophic sciences and Arabic historiography.

However, perhaps the most important point in this section, with regard to Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism (and more particularly of Sufi literature, both doctrinal and poetic) is his concluding forceful insistence (at Q III, 247-248, *repeated three times* in a few lines, and attributed to the ultimate scientific authority of Aristotle) that "everything else...is ignorance and impudence" involving either "exchanging what is untrue for what is true, or bringing in what is useless"—clearly "going astray from the path set out by the inquiry (*nazar*) of the truly intelligent (*al-'uqalā*)."

³⁷Q II 367 (ch. VI, sections 1-2). This short discussion of the distinctively "human power to think"—even more concisely summarized at the beginning of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*—is in fact the key to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of all the different "sciences" (including speculative, dogmatic Sufism), and ultimately to the structure and intentions of the entire *Muqaddima*.

³⁸The critical link for Ibn Khaldun's knowledge of Avicenna and the rationalistic (and often political) conceptions of Tūsī was almost certainly his own master in philosophy, al-Ābilī. See the brief discussion by N. Nassar, "Le Maître d'Ibn Khaldūn: al-Ābilī," in *Studia Islamica* XX (1964), pp. 103-114. That article contains some suggestive ideas on Ābilī's possible influence on Ibn Khaldun's radical pedagogical reforms and criticisms developed in ch. VI of the *Muqaddima*, and points to the importance of Ibn Khaldun's youthful *Lubāb al-Muhassal*—since Rāzī's *K. al-Muhassal* was a central target of Tūsī's philosophical polemics—but without analyzing the latter work. What is decisive here (apart from the other references to Ābilī's mastery of the philosophic sciences) is Ibn Khaldun's own indication (in his

and especially Avicenna, Averroes and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī.³⁹ Readers who approached the *Muqaddima* without all three of these essential prerequisites—a group probably including the

description of that teacher in his autobiography) that Ābilī actually spent years in the company of masters of the Avicenna-Tūsī tradition in Kerbala. (This can be contrasted further with Ibn Khaldun's account in the *Muqaddima*, Q II 378, of the way Rāzī's works reached the Maghreb, through the Tunisian religious scholar Ibn Zaytūn (d. 691/1292) and his students.)

With regard to the subject of this essay, Ibn Khaldun's most important indication of the decisive importance of Tūsī and Avicenna—and of the critical, political focus of the *Ishārāt* as read and understood within this Eastern philosophic tradition—is in an "aside" in his description of one of his childhood teachers in his autobiography [*al-Ta'rif bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa Rihlatihi Gharban wa Sharqan*, ed. M. al-Tanjī, (Cairo, 1370/1951), pp. 62-63]. This section—which also stresses the important role of both Avicenna's *Shifā'* and the Aristotelian commentaries of Averroes in the general philosophic teaching of al-Ābilī—mentions how one of his most accomplished students, who already "had a perfect knowledge of the *Ishārāt*" and the other works of Avicenna and Averroes once studied "the section on Sufism [= the final chapters of that work]" from that work with the famous chief Qadi of Tunis, but only "*alone with him in his house.*" Ibn Khaldun's stress on the extraordinary secrecy surrounding this study—which would have been pointless if those two famous concluding chapters were understood as simply another apologetic for by then widespread Sufi claims and practices—becomes much more understandable when one is aware of the actual focus of Tūsī's commentary on these sections of the *Ishārāt*, which takes up extremely delicate questions of the political nature, aims and methods of "prophecy" (understood in an explicitly universal manner) and the "imaginary" nature (and political functions) of religious beliefs in the afterlife, and which also understands the apparently "Sufi" language of those concluding chapters in the strictly rationalistic, ethico-political context provided by the earlier chapters and the rest of Avicenna's technical works.

³⁹Tūsī's philosophical writings are almost certainly the major immediate philosophic "source" or predecessor for Ibn Khaldun's understanding of Islamic philosophy and its relation with the religious sciences (including Sufism). The key work in this domain (see the preceding note) was Tūsī's highly influential, lengthy commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, which is in fact constructed as a careful, point-by-point refutation of what he considers the repeated theological abuses of Avicennan thought by the *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. (Tūsī himself, writing at the end of his tumultuous life, refers to this as his major life's work, and one he had continued to perfect for more than 40 years.) There one finds clearly and explicitly stated virtually all the major themes in Ibn Khaldun's rationalistic, distinctively *political* understanding of prophecy (and of the supposedly "mystical" passages in Avicenna), usually developed through his polemic against Rāzī. While there was also an ongoing later Eastern Islamic literature of "adjudications" (*muhākamāt*) of this fundamental quarrel between philosophy and theology, Ibn Khaldun's own personal opinion is no doubt expressed in his pointed remark (at Q III 274) that Tūsī was *better than any other* later Iranian scholar.

Ibn Khaldun's great philosophic esteem for Tūsī (despite his lifelong Shiite affiliations and key political role under the Mongol invaders, which is sufficient to explain the lack of other open references in the *Muqaddima*)—along with his fierce disdain for Rāzī's attempted "replacement" of Islamic philosophy by *kalām*, which comes out most openly in the section of chapter VI on theology—is most clearly stated (with a typically "Khaldunian" ironic use of the Qur'an) at Q III 117: "Tūsī...disputed many topics with the Imam (Rāzī, and he more perfectly resolved his inquiries and disputes, for '*above everyone with knowledge there is a true knower*' (12:76)!"

This same passage of the *Muqaddima* (at III 117, in the brief section on the Aristotelian "physical sciences") also has a crucially revealing statement of Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the relations of Avicenna, Averroes and Aristotle:

vast majority of Ibn Khaldun's potential audience—might be momentarily bothered by some of the apparent contradictions or unexplained assertions in the book, but, like many uninformed modern commentators, they would most likely come away relatively secure in the same set of beliefs and attitudes which they had brought to their reading in the first place.⁴⁰

THE DISTINCTION OF BELIEFS AND DEMONSTRATIVE KNOWLEDGE:

However, even for readers without any prior knowledge of philosophy, Ibn Khaldun gives a more than adequate explanation of the basic grounds for his critique of contemporary Sufism in his repeated explanations of the fundamental distinction between beliefs or *opinions* ("religious" and otherwise), on the one hand, and demonstrative *knowledge*, on the other.⁴¹

Beliefs, opinions and social norms serve above all to orient action and volition, both individually and collectively, and most of the discussions of Islamic subjects (including Sufism) throughout this book are clearly meant to be understood from this very practical perspective. As Ibn Khaldun illustrates at great length throughout the *K. al-'Ibar* (and not simply in the

"It was *as though* (Avicenna) differed with Aristotle in many of his topics and stated his own opinions (*arā'*) concerning them, whereas Averroes summarized the books of Aristotle in his commentaries, following him (exactly) without differing with him. And although the (common) people (*al-nās*) composed much about that since him (= Averroes?), nevertheless these ones (i.e., Aristotle's and/or Averroes' books) are renowned to this day and the ones truly esteemed in this craft (of philosophy)."

This important passage clearly reveals Ibn Khaldun's own suspicion, discussed below (and following the famous Maghrebi examples of Ibn Tufayl and Averroes), that many of Avicenna's Neoplatonic "departures" from Aristotelian (and Farabian) principles should be properly understood in terms of prudential adaptations to his specific Islamic religio-political context and intentions—especially in relation to the competing intellectual and practical claims of *'ilm al-kalām* and speculative Sufism.

⁴⁰Although there are many more explicit and detailed allusions to the premises, aims and divisions of Aristotelian philosophy throughout the *Muqaddima* (amply discussed in the classical study by M. Mahdi already cited) than in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, still those extensive allusions are almost certainly not enough to give an idea of the pervasive influence and indispensable presuppositions of Islamic philosophy for readers without at least some prior knowledge of the philosophic sciences. However, they are certainly more than sufficient to suggest necessary further directions of thought and inquiry for any curious and properly prepared reader.

⁴¹This fundamental distinction is brought out most openly, in its application to the religious and philosophic sciences of Ibn Khaldun's time, at Q II 385-386 (ch. VI, section 9), and is again summarized—but in a more inconspicuous manner—after his survey of both groups of sciences (and their spurious imitators) at Q III 274 (ch. VI, 43), where he straightforwardly insists that the philosophic, rational sciences are all "matters of the intellect", while the Islamic so-called "sciences" (*'ulūm*) and laws "derived from the Qur'an and Sunna" are "*all matters of the imagination*!"

Muqaddima), such opinions vary greatly through history and various communities, and what is essential about them is not whether they are "true" or "false"—categories which are properly applicable only to matters subject to demonstration—but rather whether they are widely believed and followed and are therefore *practically effective* in assuring the common social ends of laws.⁴² One of the most significant remarks in this connection is his insistence (at Q I 72-73) that prophecy does not exist by natural necessity, but rather *through religious laws*, whose efficacy and very existence depend above all on the persuasive powers of imagination in creating the indispensable ground of popular belief and consensus.⁴³

Since so much of the *Muqaddima* is devoted to a careful analysis of the political effects of various Islamic beliefs and the corresponding forms and presuppositions of effective rhetorical persuasion, with the evident aim of distinguishing the positive or useful from the dangerous and destructive,⁴⁴ this same perspective can readily account for the two recurrent points of intentional ambiguity in Ibn Khaldun's discussion of Sufism. First, the widespread popular belief in the direct spiritual inspiration and mediation of the Sufi saints can be conceived as "good" insofar as it had come to be perhaps the primary underpinning of popular belief in the validity of Muhammad's mission and revelation in Ibn Khaldun's own society. This readily explains why

⁴²See Ibn Khaldun's explanation (at Q II 126-128) of the greater effectiveness of religious laws, vis-à-vis governmental, outwardly restraining laws, due to the additional factor of popular Islamic beliefs in posthumous rewards and punishments. The opening chapters of the *Muqaddima* are replete with references to the "anarchy" and natural "evil tendencies" (e.g., Q I 233) of people whenever they are not restrained by their belief in religious or governmental laws, and Ibn Khaldun consistently presents Muhammad's "transformation" of the "savage" Arabs (see especially I 270-275) as an archetypal illustration of the effectiveness of that religio-political influence on the popular imagination.

⁴³To take only a few examples, see Q I 235-236 on the importance of the "imaginary" (in the use of tribal and genealogical "pedigrees") in moving the passions and imagination to create group feeling, and the ways Muhammad and 'Umar both encouraged this; or Ibn Khaldun's strong insistence at Q I 244-245 (in an explicit criticism of Averroes' commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*) that the importance of rhetoric consists in swaying the beliefs and passions of (only) "those whose opinions count." (This last point may help explain why Ibn Khaldun is so explicit in his criticisms of Sufi "theorists" writing for the '*ulamā*', while remaining more reticent in his critique of Sufi poetry directed toward the masses, which does at least reinforce their politically useful naïve religious faith and sentiments.)

This particular question of the "natural" grounds and political conditions of (religious) "prophecy," following Avicenna, was already developed in considerable detail in the above-mentioned polemics of Tūsī and Rāzī (see notes 38-39 above on their commentaries on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*), as well as in the long series of later philosophical "adjudications" (*muhākamāt*) of their disputes.

Ibn Khaldun discusses the epistemological foundations of prophecy and Sufism in similar (and outwardly positive) terms, while at the same time he does everything possible to undermine and debunk—for more perspicacious readers, at least—what were popularly taken to be the corresponding claims of the saints and certain living Sufi shaykhs to be the authoritative guides and interpreters of the Prophet's message. The same motivations even more clearly underlie his lengthy attempts, especially in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, to differentiate between what he sees as the "positive" ethical and political consequences of some forms of Sufi rhetoric—namely, those popularly inculcating strong inner habits of unconscious obedience and faithfulness to the general ethical precepts of the religious Law—and what he presents as the historically "later" and politically dangerous framework of individualistic practices and spiritual, other-worldly metaphysical interpretations which had become associated with that supposedly "primitive," unquestioning moral state ostensibly shared by all the Companions and earliest Muslims.

Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the *theoretical*, epistemological pretensions of contemporary Sufism is—as his unambiguously hostile *fatwā* would already suggest—far more radical and uncompromising. His entire survey of the intellectual scene of his time in Chapter VI is built on the fundamental distinction (at VI,9; Q II 385-386) between the *rational*, philosophic sciences, which are common to all civilizations (where they are found), since they are based on human beings' intrinsic "ability to think" and the corresponding regularities of the natural order; and the variety of *conventional*, traditional religious "sciences" (or more properly, "crafts"),⁴⁵ which are based on principles established by the "authority" of a particular religious law. All of Chapter VI, when it is read carefully, can be understood as a detailed attempt to carefully distinguish the proper forms of both kinds of "science" from the wide range of misleading or degenerate pretenders and imitations which have grown up in both areas: in each category, Ibn Khaldun generally begins with the relatively sound and valid sciences and moves through increasingly distorted and dangerous pseudo-sciences—culminating in both cases with writings or practices

⁴⁴Note Ibn Khaldun's problematic depiction of his own situation in the long quotation (from Q I 201-202) earlier (at n. 5 above) concerning the many "simpletons and idiots" who devote themselves to Sufism, with its crucial emphasis on their widespread "activity and influence" for both good and bad.

⁴⁵The recurrent ambiguities in Ibn Khaldun's discussions throughout Chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* often turn on the convenient popular Arabic designation of all the Islamic religious crafts (and other hybrid imitations or pseudo-sciences, including later Sufi writings) as *'ulūm*.

he explicitly ties to contemporary Sufism.⁴⁶ The obvious conclusion—which he brings out explicitly in his summary at Q III 258 (ch. VI, 37)—is that Sufism in fact should not be included among either the religious crafts or speculative/philosophic sciences, since it is in fact a spurious, dangerously misleading attempted hybrid of both. However, by the end of this survey, Ibn Khaldun has made it quite clear to his more thoughtful readers that both of the relatively "positive" potential effects of contemporary Sufism (i.e., those discussed in the preceding paragraph) have to do *only* with its indirect political and ethical impact on popular religious beliefs and practice, and have nothing at all to do with any philosophic or scientific validity of its more recent "theoretical" proponents.⁴⁷

PHILOSOPHIC PROPHETOLOGY AND SPECULATIVE SUFISM:

The intentionally ambiguous language utilized throughout Ibn Khaldun's discussions of prophetic epistemology and its relations to Sufism (at the beginnings of both chapter I and chapter VI of the *Muqaddima*) had its classical Islamic expression throughout the works of Avicenna,⁴⁸ and had found its most elaborate earlier development—in the sense in which it is

⁴⁶His intention and procedure here, although much more complex, often closely resembles that followed in Averroes' famous *Fasl al-Maqāl*—with the obvious change that the major object of criticism in this case is no longer *kalām* (although Ibn Khaldun is even more devastating in his analysis of its intellectual pretensions), but contemporary Sufism.

⁴⁷Ibn Khaldun's refusal in ch. VI to give any more than the vaguest second- or third-hand account of the metaphysical teachings of Sufi writers like Ibn 'Arabi or Ibn Sab'īn, and his corresponding highly misleading attempts to associate those authors with things like magic, astrological predictions, antinomian practices and the like clearly flow directly (and quite intentionally) from his own philosophical judgement concerning the scientific invalidity and practical dangers of those texts. Neither position can be adequately explained either by simple ignorance of the authentic writings of the authors in question, or by the supposition that they were considered "suspect" or "heretical," given what we know of their widespread diffusion (both directly and in more popular forms) for more than a century in North Africa and Mamluk Egypt. (See also the recent broad historical study of that wider influence in the Arab world in this period—and the reactions against it—in the recent work of Alexander Knysh cited above.) Indeed, as we have noted at the beginning of this paper, it is undoubtedly the wide-ranging popular influence of such writings that largely helps to explain the depth of Ibn Khaldun's opposition and concern throughout the *Muqaddima*.

⁴⁸For a detailed study of the Avicennan ideas discussed here—and their philosophic roots in Avicenna's creative adaptation of Farabi's political philosophy—, see our article on "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," chapter 4 in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. C. Butterworth, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 142-188. It should be stressed that although the rhetorical adaptation of Avicenna's theories to the Islamic context of Sufism is most fully developed in the final two chapters of the *Ishārāt* (as well as in his less well-known rationalizing

used here—in Tūsī's elaborate, highly defenses of Avicenna's rationalistic political outlook against Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's theological criticisms and abuses of those same arguments.⁴⁹ Since a detailed reading and analysis of these key sections would require at least a short book, here we can only give a very brief summary of the basic features of Avicenna's philosophic interpretation of prophecy and the ways it is understood and applied by Ibn Khaldun, especially with regard to Sufism.

Avicenna's treatment of the specific qualities of prophecy (*khasā'is al-nubuwwa*), in each of his systematic works (including the *Ishārāt*), is divided into three areas, corresponding to three distinct powers or activities of the human rational soul. It is especially important to emphasize that for Avicenna—just as for Ibn Khaldun—these "prophetic" attributes and activities are in fact always explicitly grounded in an analysis of real, *universal* aspects of the human souls as such,⁵⁰ so that the fundamental ambiguity of interpretation has to do with showing how anyone can actually know and demonstrate that any particular epistemic *claim* or activity is in reality "prophetic" in a *true* sense. Most readers have naturally read—and still continue to read—these sections simply as an apologetic philosophic justification or "explanation" of their own pre-existing beliefs in the prophecy and claims to mystical inspiration and powers of particular holy individuals, without stopping to ask the more awkward, but practically and politically inescapable, question of what that explanation might imply about the possible *verification* or true interpretation of any particular prophetic or mystical belief and truth-claim.

(1) The highest form of prophecy, for Avicenna, is the "intellectual" level which he defines in terms of his theory of the "sacred intellect" (*'aql qudsī*), a hypothetically extreme form of the process of "intuitional inspiration" (*hads*) by which the theoretical intellect in fact always

commentary on famously 'mystical' sections of the *Theology of 'Aristotle'*, the wider philosophic explanation and understanding of those phenomena (and their relation to prophecy), as summarized here, is largely consistent throughout Avicenna's various systematic works composed at different periods of his life.

⁴⁹See notes 38-39 above.

⁵⁰Apart from the discussions in the "psychological" sections (*K. al-Nafs*) of his longer works, Avicenna's supplementary treatment of "prophetic" questions and qualities in his sections on metaphysics has to do either with (1) establishing the existence and nature of the separate Intellects (as the source of intellectual "inspiration" assumed in his epistemology) or (2) his brief discussion of the activity of the prophets—at the very end of the metaphysical section in each of his longer systematic works—which

arrives at the awareness of the missing middle terms in its process of intellectual investigation. The critical implication of this theory, and ultimately its far-reaching motivating intention, is that it in fact positions the accomplished *philosopher*—i.e., that person who is in reality consciously able to elaborate the chains of rational conception and demonstrative reasoning appropriate to any given field of knowledge—as *the only truly qualified interpreter* of any claims to a "prophecy" having any rationally knowable and demonstrable contents, whether that content is presented in explicitly demonstrative form or (as is almost always the case) in the form of imaginary, symbolic representations.

Hence the archetypal representative—or at least the only truly qualified interpreter—of *this* specific cognitive, intellectual aspect or form of "prophecy" is none other than the accomplished philosopher, and more particularly *Avicenna himself*.⁵¹ With regard to those ordinarily and popularly regarded as "prophets" (including Muhammad), the upshot of this theory is not to label as "untrue" the vast majority of their revelations which apparently do *not* qualify as rationally demonstrative "knowledge," but rather to focus the thoughtful interpreter's attention on the practical functions and aims of those popularly accepted historical "revelations" in providing precisely the sort of *politically and ethically necessary beliefs* and conventional premises whose understanding is the major focus of Ibn Khaldun's work. In fact Ibn Khaldun—like Averroes before him—in fact goes to some lengths to eliminate any possibility or suggestion of a deeper ontological grounding of those particular revealed principles which do *not* conform to the contents of rational demonstrative sciences, but which often do constitute guiding normative beliefs on the level of popular religious "imagination."

Already Avicenna, in the last chapters of the *Ishārāt* and his commentary on sections of the *Theology of "Aristotle"* (a version of Plotinus' *Enneads*) favored by some Islamic mystics, had gone on to apply this epistemological schema to the claims of some mystics to a direct "witnessing" (*mushāhada*) of the Truth. Such "witnessing," he concedes, might coincidentally happen to be true (*mushāhada haqqa*), but *only* when its contents in fact coincide with what can

presupposes all three of the "prophetic" aspects of the soul, just as in the concluding chapters of the *Ishārāt*.

⁵¹As Avicenna boldly claims in his description of this theory in the *Dānish-Nāmeḥ*, a claim explicitly corroborated by his disciple Bahmanyar in the corresponding section of his influential *K. al-Tahsīl* (see details in our study of Avicenna's political philosophy cited above).

be rationally *demonstrated* by reasoning (*qiyās*)—although that rational criterion of truth, he stresses, certainly does not always coincide with the various complex emotions and sensations or imaginations popularly associated with such Sufi terms as *mushāhada* and the ecstatic visions and claims of mystics more generally. While Avicenna did not explicitly stress the negative and critical implications of his account—since he may well have wished to attract toward philosophy some of the support and interest of those initially drawn to speculative mysticism—, Ibn Khaldun is typically somewhat more forthcoming in underlining those negative epistemological consequences for his more thoughtful and attentive readers.⁵²

Thus, in his version of Avicenna's understanding, the claims of the mystics and other famous religious figures to "unveiling" (*kashf*) of the future turn out to be, where valid, entirely explicable in terms of *rational* foresight and accurate analysis of earthly conditions,⁵³ and he repeatedly ridicules any claims to inner knowledge of spiritual reality—beyond the philosophically intelligible regularities underlying all visible earthly phenomena—as clearly the product of vain imaginings.⁵⁴ Likewise, his frequent description of Sufi experiences as forms of

⁵²This subject is an excellent illustration of Ibn Khaldun's insistence, already noted above (from ch. VI of the *Muqaddima*), on the very different aspect which his book is intended to present for readers able to think several steps ahead. While readers of the sections on mystical epistemology might understand his remarks on *kashf* and *wijdān*—if taken in isolation—in a positive, almost apologetic sense supporting Sufi claims, those same sections take on a radically different tone when viewed in light of the philosophic and ontological explanations provided elsewhere in his book. One scathingly ironical (although still outwardly ambiguous) illustration of this rhetorical approach is his pointed comparison (at Q I 192) of claimed "Sufi" perceptions with those of diviners, the sick, dying and insane.

⁵³It is especially important to note the way in which all of Ibn Khaldun's illustrations of successful or meaningful "unveiled" perception of the "unseen" (*ghayb*) turn out to refer to future *this-worldly events*, and not to the symbolic and spiritual realities, on higher planes of being, which are the actual object of almost all Sufi writing and practice (and the very specific object of Ibn Khaldun's own epistemological criticisms). The particularly significant illustration of Ja'far al-Sādiq's mystical "unveiling" concerning the eventual failure of so many anti-Umayyad Alid rebellions has already been mentioned. The full irony of that illustration of course depends on its coming in the *Muqaddima* after a detailed historical analysis of the relative political and material strengths and weaknesses of the opposing parties.

⁵⁴Two typical (and equally ironic) illustrations of this not too subtle debunking of mystical claims are Ibn Khaldun's ridicule (at Q I 18) of the "crazy talk" of those who claim to have had a mystical unveiling of the city of 'Ād "beyond sensual perception," or of "historical reports" (at Q I 57-60) concerning the existence of jinn, monsters, and the like. As usual, Ibn Khaldun's failure to extend these ironic and critical remarks explicitly to such fundamental religious and Qur'anic topics as the existence and description of Heaven and Hell (and to the mystics' claims of perceptions relevant to their

wijdān (“ecstasy”) must be understood in light of his application of the same term in describing the emotional effects of drinking wine (at Q II 300), and in portraying the "*wijdānī*" effects of military music (at Q II 42-43) as "a kind of drunkenness"—i.e., as combining what he clearly sees as typical of Sufism in general: a dangerously deluded combination of personal irresponsibility and mistaking one's shifting inner emotions and arbitrary imagination for "divine knowledge."⁵⁵ As usual, what is fundamentally important in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of this question, within its wider polemic framework, is precisely everything that he does *not* deal with explicitly: i.e., the Islamic mystics' actual preoccupation with levels and manifestations of a spiritual reality transcending the Aristotelian ontological schema he assumes; the elaborate philosophic schemas by which they sought to ground and explain those supra-sensory fields of spiritual reality; and the centrality of those spiritual questions—such as the immortality and post-mortem survival of each individual soul—in fundamental teachings of Islam in areas where the great Sufis claimed to offer indispensable and authoritative guidance to the *trans*-historical intentions of the prophets. However, Ibn Khaldun's insistence—in the *fatwā* with which we began—on burning and destroying some of the most intellectually sophisticated and influential Islamic treatments of these spiritual subjects should provide more than sufficient commentary on his systematic silence here in the *Muqaddima* concerning those fundamental Sufi epistemological and metaphysical claims.

(2) The second key aspect of Avicenna's treatment of prophecy—and of the corresponding associated claims and activities of Islamic mystics—has to do with his discussions of the activities and influences of the *imagination*. In this respect, much more than in first case of rational, philosophic knowledge, Avicenna explicitly emphasizes the universality of the phenomena in question. Thus, to the extent that our "imaginal" perceptions, whether in ordinary dreams or prophetic visions, claim some rational knowledge content, he stresses the absolute necessity of a demonstrably reasoned interpretation (whether we call it *ta'wīl* or *ta'bīr*) grounded in what can be independently known by the rational sciences and their logical methods. However, once again what Avicenna does not so openly stress is the way this essential

understanding) would inevitably be interpreted in ways mirroring each reader's own level of understanding.

philosophic qualification or "description" of inspiration and revelation is not really a 'justification' of popular beliefs, but rather an extraordinarily severe *limitation* of prophetic claims. For in fact it does quite intentionally tend to eliminate the pursuit of all "imaginary", symbolic and aesthetic means—clearly including most of the arts, as well as religion—as a viable and reliable way to true knowledge and to any authority based on claims to an objective knowledge of reality.

Practically speaking, what is far more important already in Avicenna's discussion of the religious dimensions of imagination—for example, in his many short epistles interpreting and justifying prayer and other basic religious practices—is his suggestion of its pervasive and far-reaching *ethical and political effects*, and especially of each prophet's remarkably lasting influence on the imagination of others: i.e., the ongoing mass of "believers" in a particular religious lawgiver. This lasting political effect, he repeatedly suggests, is the *true*, historically tangible and self-evident "miracle" of each prophecy. It should not be necessary to underline the manifold ways in which virtually all the *Muqaddima* (and Ibn Khaldun's *History* more generally) can be conceived as an extended commentary on Avicenna's allusive suggestions concerning these more practical, political and ethical prophetic functions of imagination. What is perhaps most striking in this regard is his systematic avoidance, in this domain at least, of any of the publicly contending distinguishing criteria between the "revelations" of prophets and saints⁵⁶ (or

⁵⁵Readers of traditional Sufi poetry, in Arabic or other Islamic languages, could also not help but be struck by Ibn Khaldun's pointedly ironic *reversal* here of the central symbolic, metaphorical/spiritual role of wine-imagery throughout those traditions.

⁵⁶The key passage here is at the very beginning of the *Muqaddima* (Q I 165-173), where he passes in review the various theories (including the philosophic ones, at I 170-172) about the "signs" effectively distinguishing true from false prophets—one of the major topics in the influential philosophical disputes between Tūsī and Rāzī (above all in Tūsī's seminal commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*). Not surprisingly, the treatment of Muhammad and the early caliphs throughout the rest of the *Muqaddima* elaborates only the (essentially *political*) criteria of the *rationalist* philosophers.

Once again, Ibn Khaldun's single-minded focus on these practical political and social criteria is certainly not unrelated to his silence concerning—and vehemently attempted suppression of—some of the most influential Islamic religious books claiming to provide some insight into a more comprehensive spiritual hierarchy of values and intentions, or his repeated criticisms of the contending prototypical representatives (within his own community)—figures such as al-Hallāj, 'Alī or al-Husayn—of values calling into question the primacy of those political criteria. As with Avicenna, it is no accident that the one potential criterion of value explicitly mentioned and left intact is that provided by the pursuit of those rational (true) sciences which Ibn Khaldun repeatedly mentions as providing human beings' ultimate perfection.

between either group and true or false pretenders, social reformers, magicians and so forth), apart from the following two *politically* decisive points: (a) their ability to assure and maintain the lasting belief of their followers; and (b) their ability to direct and mobilize effectively the actions of the masses following from those beliefs.

(3) As for the third property of prophecy discussed by Avicenna, that of its “physical” effects and influences in this world, that philosopher and his successors (especially Tūsī) had already stressed that (a) such activities are grounded in the natural order and corresponding powers of the soul, and (b) that those powers (even in their more extraordinary forms) are widely shared by a multitude of human beings with *no* religious or mystical pretensions (e.g., magicians, sorcerers and diviners), who can use them for all sorts of good and bad ends. Once again, Ibn Khaldun likewise focuses in detail on the *this-worldly* effects and uses of those natural powers, while effectively and systematically eliminating any possible “supra-natural” explanations or uses which might otherwise be taken to support the wider claims of contemporary Sufis. Perhaps even more significant is his intentional attempt to portray the activities and claims of the most influential and prestigious Islamic mystics of his time (such as Ibn ‘Arabi) as in fact falling primarily into this very suspect territory of pseudo-astrologers, magicians and charlatans.⁵⁷

A further indication that these core relations between Avicenna's and Ibn Khaldun's accounts of prophecy and mysticism—and Ibn Khaldun's detailed development of the thoroughly “rationalistic” implications of Avicenna's thought in this area—are not purely accidental is

⁵⁷As discussed above, Ibn Khaldun's repeated attempts to portray contemporary Sufism in this pejorative light cannot be explained by any ignorance (or popular suspicion) of the more intellectual and spiritual aspects of Sufism discussed in precisely the sort of works he wished to burn. Nor can they be explained by a pious religious desire for “reform” and “purification” of popular religious practices such as that which motivated Ibn Taymiyya, even when (as in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) Ibn Khaldun uses a superficially similar rhetoric.

The corresponding gross misrepresentation throughout the *Muqaddima* of the works of Ibn ‘Arabi, which had come to constitute the leading ideological justification (in Islamic terms) of virtually all forms of Sufism by Ibn Khaldun's time, is one of the more striking illustrations of the latter's rhetorical techniques. See, for example, the attribution to Ibn ‘Arabi at Q II 196 of two obviously apocryphal prediction works (*malāhim*) and Ibn ‘Arabi's implicit association, in the same context (II 197-201) with clearly fraudulent predictions by a later scandalously “fallen,” swindling and antinomian Qalandar dervish (the ‘hippies’ of Ibn Khaldun’s day). Even more important, given the political centrality (and notoriety) of the claims flowing from Ibn ‘Arabi's assertion of his own status as “seal of the Muhammadan saints”—and his corresponding theories and claims concerning the socio-religious roles of Sufi saints and masters more generally—is Ibn Khaldun's facetious presentation of that doctrine and his citation of a supposed “forecast” of the Mahdi's coming at Q II 165-167.

provided by Ibn Khaldun's careful silence concerning three more typically Neoplatonic features of Avicenna's thought which al-Ghazālī and later Sufi thinkers had repeatedly used in order to construct a pseudo-philosophic justification for the superiority of Sufism as a path to the Truth. (Not coincidentally, at least two of these novel theories are important features of Ibn 'Arabi's and other later Sufi adaptations of Avicennan philosophic themes, and all three were vehemently and repeatedly criticized by Averroes throughout his commentaries on Aristotle.)⁵⁸ The first of these was Avicenna's assertion of his own metaphysics or divine science as a distinct field of knowledge *independent* of the conclusions of physics, and also necessary as a preliminary foundation to assure the truth of the other philosophic sciences. In contrast to this novel assertion—which could easily be taken to justify claims for the extra-philosophical forms of metaphysical knowledge and investigation favored by the Sufis—Ibn Khaldun's accounts of the rational sciences always follow Averroes in stressing the key foundational role of physics and the *autonomy* of its investigation of all the natural orders of being.

Even more conspicuous by its absence in Ibn Khaldun's account is any reference to Avicenna's apparent support of the immortality and substantiality of each individual soul *per se* (i.e., quite apart from its intellectual perfection and gradual acquisition of the secondary intelligibles)—a theory which again would tend to provide a foundation in demonstrative "knowledge" for central religious and Sufi conceptions which Ibn Khaldun clearly prefers to deal with in their function simply as ethically and politically important *beliefs*. Closely related to this

⁵⁸These were undoubtedly the central points of difference involving Aristotelian "physics" (the *tabī'īyyāt*) between Avicenna, on the one hand, and Aristotle and Averroes on the other, alluded to in the key passage (partially translated in n. 39 above) in which Ibn Khaldun questions Avicenna's (political/rhetorical) motivations for his departures from Aristotle's positions and pointedly insists on the greater philosophic reliability of Averroes and Aristotle. In fact all three of these fundamental metaphysical differences are taken up in the "physical" books of Avicenna, and all three are pointedly *left out* in Ibn Khaldun's own accounts of that discipline and its results.

For the ways in which these three innovative aspects of Avicenna's philosophy were elaborated by later Islamic thinkers in order to provide a much more Neoplatonic and spiritualist account of being and a metaphysical foundation for wider religious and Sufi beliefs, see the discussions and detailed illustrations in J. Michot's *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination*, (Louvain, 1987). While this sort of thoroughly mystical interpretation of Avicenna's ideas cannot be easily reconciled with what we know of Avicenna's own life, works, disciples and philosophic antecedents—as argued in detail in our study of his political philosophy cited above—, it does represent a highly influential current of *later* Eastern Islamic thought, and indeed precisely the sort of "Avicennism" (subsequently influential in the Latin West, and historically connected with al-Ghazālī) which was already being vigorously criticized by Ibn Tufayl and Averroes long before Ibn Khaldun.

is Ibn Khaldun's emphatic insistence in the *Muqaddima*, at each ontological discussion of the "angels" whose existence is revealed by physical science, that these are *only* the pure intellects moving the heavenly spheres. This is a pointed and intentional denial of the controversial Avicennan theory of the existence of a separate order of corporeal (or "imaginal") angels associated with the bodies of each planet or sphere—a theory (again assumed by Ibn ‘Arabi and his interpreters) which became frequently used in later Islamic thought to explain separate, higher realms of imaginal being and of spiritual influence and revelation *distinct* from ordinary human acts of intellection.

THE CONSTRUCTIVE AIMS OF IBN KHALDUN'S CRITICISMS:

Hopefully the preceding discussion has brought out the ways in which *both* the intellectual and the more practical facets of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of Sufism (as well as other Islamic religious sciences, such as *kalâm*) have their deeper roots in his own understanding of Islamic philosophy. From that comprehensive perspective, the whole purpose of the *Muqaddima*, as of his new science more generally, can only be fully understood in the larger context of the hierarchy of the philosophic sciences (both practical and theoretical) and the corresponding awareness of their practical and historical interaction with the new religious “crafts” and public beliefs in the Islamic context. We can envision that wider process more clearly by looking at (a) the aims and consequences Ibn Khaldun could expect his critique to have on various classes of readers; and (b) the ways that his far-reaching criticisms of contemporary Sufi claims, particularly to intellectual and religious authority, also seem to have been grounded and reflected in his own life and activity.

To begin with, for readers without the necessary rare intellectual qualifications and philosophic orientation described above, neither the *Muqaddima* nor the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* would be likely to lead to any radical change in their beliefs, although it might point them toward a renewed devotion and attention to their own practice of their particular form of Islam, and perhaps even to a renewed awareness of the this-worldly consequences of that practice. And if such readers happened to be among the group of jurists already deeply suspicious of Sufi claims and writings, they would find in Ibn Khaldun's works—including his unambiguous *fatwā* cited at

the beginning of this exposition—ample further justification for their hostile opinions.⁵⁹ However, such limited aims would scarcely justify or explain the extraordinarily complex intellectual and rhetorical effort and intention so evident throughout his criticisms of Sufism in this work. As such, they serve to remind us of the extreme seriousness with which Ibn Khaldun himself conceived of the intellectual dimensions of his work, and of the irreducible differences between his distinctively philosophical outlook and the modern Islamic "reformist" movements with which it has often been rather misleadingly compared.

For more qualified readers, Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism could be expected to lead first of all to an intellectual clarification of the separate, legitimate and harmonious aims and domains of philosophy and religion—and to a corresponding re-situating of the various claims and activities associated with Sufism (along with other religious "pseudo-sciences" and dangerous hybrids of religion and philosophy), in both the theoretical and practical domains. Intellectually, that would certainly mean focusing their attention, in the most efficient possible manner, on those particular philosophic activities and sciences which Ibn Khaldun consistently describes as leading to human beings' ultimate perfection—and eventually on discovering and implementing the appropriate means for assuring the preservation and continuation of those essential philosophical sciences within an Islamic society.

The further *practical* consequences of that philosophic awareness (as with Ibn Khaldun's own very practical *fatwā* cited above) would of course depend greatly on each reader's own degree of authority and ability to influence others.⁶⁰ We may mention at least three such aims to which Ibn Khaldun himself devotes considerable effort and intention in the *Muqaddima*:

(1) The first such consequence is evident in his repeated efforts at the elimination of all "competitors" (including above all speculative or theoretical Sufism) for the philosophic sciences, in relation to the rare elite properly qualified to pursue them. This aim is evident both in his clarification of the true principles and relations of each of the various pseudo-sciences

⁵⁹One could of course add to these more immediate effects the eventual longer-term, indirect consequences of the creative actions of the rarer individuals in the second group (of qualified potential philosophers) discussed in the next paragraph.

⁶⁰This can be seen, for example, in Ibn Khaldun's own legal and other activities mentioned below, or in the contrasting public writings and practical political activities of such philosophers as Tūsī, Averroes, or Avicenna (or the teaching efforts of Ibn Khaldun's own master al-‘Ābilī, cited above).

(both religious and philosophic), and in his repeated allusions to their delusive effects on the mass of "simpletons and idiots" among the wider population. Thus in his own late autobiography, as throughout the *Muqaddima* itself, he continually points to the supposed results of such deluded pursuits in helping to eliminate both serious religious and scientific scholarship in Maghrebi society, while alluding more delicately to their pernicious effects in Egypt and the Islamic East where, as we pointed out at the beginning, these Sufi understandings of Islam and human perfection were of course more thoroughly established.

(2) A second further consequence would be the appropriate rational ordering of education, time, manpower and material resources, not simply in one's own life, but also in the wider society, in order to encourage others to reach human beings' ultimate (purely intellectual) perfection, and to enable others to follow their properly founded guidance.⁶¹ This process—at least on the level of the properly qualified and trained individual and that person's sphere of activity—need not be perceived as "utopian." And in fact the concluding sections of chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* (immediately before Ibn Khaldun's final long treatment of Arabic poetry) contain essential discussions of the hierarchy and order of the sciences, and of the best pedagogical methods and assumptions needed to fulfill the highest human ends.

(3) Finally, in order to assure the necessary *practical preconditions* for pursuing what Ibn Khaldun understands to be the highest human ends, the removal of the "illusions" which he sees as typifying contemporary Sufism (and its ontological claims and presuppositions) would clear the way for a more flexible and effective interpretation and application of the accepted religious norms in light of what he presents as their *true* socio-political ends and with a fuller appreciation of their actual limiting conditions and possibilities. Ibn Khaldun's own repeated emphasis on effective, non-reflective internalized popular allegiance to "the law" is clearly not viewed here simply as a religious or ethical end in itself, but as one of a number of necessary socio-political

⁶¹It is important to note the full significance of Ibn Khaldun's brief reference (Q II 126-128) to the central philosophic theme (for both Averroes and Farabi) of the "*virtuous city*" (*al-madīnat al-fādila*) and the scale of real human finalities it suggests—a far-reaching significance (for readers acquainted with Farabi's works and their profound impact on Islamic philosophy) that is not adequately reflected by the use of the term "utopian" in the existing English translation.

conditions for intellectual reform and renewal, including eventually more appropriate interpretations of the religious laws themselves.⁶²

An essential test of our interpretation of the relations of religion and philosophy in Ibn Khaldun's written critique of Sufism—just as in the related cases of Avicenna or Tūsī—is its congruity with what we know of the rest of his life and activity. And in fact, not only is there no sign of Sufi practice, study or support in his known career as a politician, court official, teacher and Maliki judge (exemplified most notably in the outspokenly anti-Sufi *fatwā* with which we began!), but the same sort of pointed, thinly veiled critique even marks the very beginning of his own autobiography, where the political failures and retreat of his own father and grandfather, after centuries of familial prestige and renown, is suggestively traced to the influence of a leading Sufi preacher of Tunis.⁶³

Whatever the relevance of the personal connection he seems to make in that case, there can be little doubt that at least some of the recurrent passion in his denunciations of contemporary Sufism flows from his perception of an inner connection between its growing intellectual and socio-political influence in Islamic culture and the recent political and material decline of that culture (at least in the Maghreb and Andalusia), which is such a central theme in his new study of history. Such recurrent items as his criticism of the various mahdist and messianic rebellions as obstacles to real lasting political reforms; the squandering of scarce societal resources on the "simpletons" populating the Sufi *zāwiyas* and *khānegahs* often lavishly

⁶²Hence, as already noted, his criticisms of Sufism turn out to have an entirely different motivation than in the case, for example, of a more public religious "reformer" like Ibn Taymiyya, who was totally motivated by the religious "purity" of his ideal, rather than its likely worldly consequences. Ibn Khaldun's depiction of religious laws, Islamic or otherwise (and both in the *Muqaddima* and the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*), is not at all "literalist" and frozen, but instead focuses on understanding the process of their historical evolution and development in light of changing political and social "benefits" (*masālih*). There is no sign (except in the occasional rhetorical appeal to certain popular beliefs) of any illusion of a "purification" or "return" to an ideal source as a magical formula for all circumstances, and everything in his hundreds of pages of historical and sociological analysis would argue against the dangers and pitfalls of such an illusion (at least when held by those with real political authority and responsibility).

⁶³*Al-Ta'rif*, page 14; the full weight of this turning "from the path of the military prowess and service (of the rulers) to the path of (religious) learning and spiritual retreat" comes from its following many pages (most of pp. 1-14) detailing centuries of martial and political exploits by Ibn Khaldun's earlier ancestors—a forceful recapitulation, in his own family history, of the key themes of "decline" pervading the *Muqaddima* and his wider *History*. (See also the excellent discussion of Ibn Khaldun's

patronized by the Mamluks and other Muslim rulers of his time; and the more profound misdirection of indispensable human and intellectual capacities into futile activities and pointless speculations which is elaborated with such ironic and telling detail in his survey of the contemporary sciences: all of these concerns clearly have their own immediate, poignant roots in his own experience and actively involved political situation. A significant sign that Ibn Khaldun proudly practiced what he preached, even in the later Egyptian phase of his career, is the incident recounted near the end of his autobiography in which he exposed the misalliance between those he considered fraudulent Maghrebi muftis and "those of their race retired in zawiyas" for "so-called reforms," and eventually succeeded in getting such people "to leave their zawiyas and dry up their source of profits...."⁶⁴

READING THE *MUQADDIMA*: RELATED APPLICATIONS OF IBN KHALDUN'S RHETORIC

The distinctive rhetorical methods and devices we have illustrated in this paper with regard to Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of contemporary Sufism are by no means limited to that complex subject. Once the careful reader has learned to recognize the underlying motives and practical and intellectual concerns which guide his rhetoric, it soon becomes evident that those features apply equally to many other related areas of potential ethical, intellectual and religious concern. And just as in the case of "Sufism", each reader's ability to discern this extraordinary literary craft almost always depends on having prior knowledge and awareness of the "conventional" wisdom and related competing conceptions of knowledge and proper practice that would be taken for granted by the learned Arabic readership of Ibn Khaldun's own time. In this regard, it may be helpful to conclude by mentioning specifically some further telling illustrations of four of the most important rhetorical devices which are to be found throughout the *Muqaddima*, devices whose prominence has become evident over the years in our seminars devoted to that work.

autobiography, focusing on its relation to the themes of this study, in the authoritative work of M. Mahdi cited above.)

⁶⁴*Al-Ta'rif*, p. . The same later sections also allude to some of the hostility, whether popular or learned, that such reforming actions and intentions seem to have aroused, and which may help account for the relative brevity of Ibn Khaldun's appointments as a Maliki judge, despite his friendship with powerful Mamluk figures.

- **Telling Silence:** One of the most powerful—but also potentially most hidden—rhetorical methods in Ibn Khaldun’s arsenal, which we have seen him use constantly in regard to contemporary Sufi writers, is his ability to pass over in complete silence key historical events, issues, actors, etc. which were surely known to his readers, and which they would normally *expect* to be mentioned in a particular context. Among the most striking illustrations of that revealing approach is his apparent silence⁶⁵ regarding the major historical role of the Kharijite ‘Ibādīs (of the kingdom of Tahert and elsewhere) and their Berber followers in the earliest process of “islamicisation” of the indigenous, *non-Arab* populations of North Africa. It is doubtful that this particular omission can simply be explained either by theological prejudices, since one key feature of the *Muqaddima* is Ibn Khaldun’s wide-ranging fascination with the historical success of the Fatimids (despite the obvious “sensitivity” of Shiite theology and proclivities among his own primary audience); or by the accidents of surviving historical documentation, since the existence of the North African ‘Ibadis and their rule was well known, and is at least mentioned by a considerable range of Arabic historical sources. On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun’s learned readers could be assumed to be well aware of the recurrently destructive political and historical consequences of what the Sunni (and also Shiite) ulama’ normally viewed as the relatively “anarchical” and troublingly “democratic” theological approaches and presuppositions of the full range of popular Kharijite movements, tendencies which—like some of the later Sufis discussed in this paper—so radically challenged those learned scholars’ most basic norms of religious knowledge, authority and right order.

- **Moral “Shocks”:** As we have pointed out in a number of cases above, one of Ibn Khaldun’s most obvious rhetorical methods—and probably the one which has particularly led certain modern Muslim interpreters to note remarkable resemblances to Machiavelli—is his pointedly “realistic” (in the sense of *Realpolitik*) stress, in many different historical contexts, on the powerful contrast between what have been popularly judged to be the ethically or religiously “right” and “just” attitudes and behavior, on the one hand, and those more pragmatically amoral attitudes and behavior which in fact proved to be politically effective and successful. That unrealistic, popular moral “idealism”—or at least, a morally *critical* standpoint toward the

⁶⁵ Always subject to new manuscript discoveries, of course. For this illustration, we are grateful to our student Mr. Taliesin Davies, who carefully investigated the historical sources on the Ibadis of

questionable actions and public policies of many earlier Muslim rulers and their policies—which he so explicitly and mordantly criticizes, is by no means limited to the ethical teachings associated with later “Sufi” writers.

In fact, students of a great many classical Islamic historians—including central figures like al-Tabarī, who were certainly familiar to most of Ibn Khaldun’s learned audience—are of course quite familiar with the major, self-consciously ethical and religious role of the historical events they were discussing, especially the constantly contested, religiously paradigmatic events and actors of the first two centuries of the Islamic era. The same ongoing tensions between political “realism” and “idealism” were also powerfully highlighted in the appropriate sections of the canonical hadith selections (e.g., the sections on the *fitan*, or civil wars) and—likewise often appealing to relevant hadith, among Sunni commentators—in the most influential works of Qur’an interpretation (*tafsīr*), for those verses where fundamental issues of political authority and responsibility are raised.⁶⁶ Thus *only* readers familiar with the consistently moral and often openly moralizing perspective largely shared by those classical Islamic texts and traditions, can really begin to recognize Ibn Khaldun’s thoroughgoing, consistently thought-provoking and often openly provocative undermining of what he so clearly views as their misleading confusion of unrealistic ethical ideals and practical political concerns. This intentionally highlighted contrast is most obvious in his treatment of the political and military successes and actual methods of the Umayyads and their agents (al-Hajjāj, in particular), whose unconcealed attempts to subordinate religion as an overt tool of politics—very much in line with their Byzantine and Sassanid predecessors, as with the philosopher-king ideal of Ibn Khaldun’s own Islamic philosophic tradition—were rarely presented in a positive light by any of the later traditions of Islamic religious learning.

- **Ironic “mimicking” of traditionalist arguments:** If we have highlighted in this paper the various ways Ibn Khaldun often subtly hints at his thoughtful *disagreements* with popularly received opinions, norms and conventions, this should certainly not be taken to imply that even his most literal statements of ostensible, explicit “agreement” with popular beliefs and

Tahert in preparing his recent M.A. dissertation on that subject.

⁶⁶ Again, particular thanks are due here to the participants in our graduate seminars exploring Islamic political thought in the classical traditions of *ta’rīkh*, hadith and *tafsīr*.

reasoning are meant to imply any deeper accord with the motives and assumptions that would ordinarily be taken as implicit in those particular commonplace formulae and expressions. A very typical example of this in fact highly problematic sort of “agreement” can be seen in his famous anti-Sufi *fatwā* quoted above, with its initial praises of the “path of the Sunna, of the *salaf*, according to the Book and the Sunna,” and so on, and its contrasting condemnation of all heretical “innovations”. Naïve modern readers, without any of the necessary background for understanding Ibn Khaldun’s language and all-encompassing philosophic intentions and assumptions, could certainly be forgiven for reading such a passage as only another example of the familiar “traditionalist” (*salafī*) rhetoric of an Ibn Taymiyya and his generations of imitators. Whereas of course neither “tradition” nor “innovation” have anything at all to do with the actual grounds of Ibn Khaldun’s argument and its intended practical effects in this case!

- **Conscious Misrepresentations:** Finally, the various examples we have given here of repeated massive misrepresentations of key Sufi writers and their doctrines and teachings (so that Ibn ‘Arabi, to take only the most egregious example, comes across almost exclusively in the *Muqaddima* as a would-be magician and soothsayer) should certainly not appear surprising to scholarly students of the rhetorical techniques and assumptions of classical Islamic intellectual traditions.⁶⁷ After all, perhaps nothing about this work could be more extreme than the fact that this entire “new science” of culture—which is in so many ways the most elaborate and far-reachingly creative development of the Farabian tradition of Islamic political philosophy, in which virtually every single topic is meant to be understood properly *only* within that philosophical framework—nonetheless outwardly speaks directly of that foundational intellectual tradition within a section explicitly entitled “the refutation of the philosophers”!

What this long catalogue of such recurrent intentional “misrepresentations” should suggest, at the very least, is that we should never imagine that Ibn Khaldun—at least in his *Muqaddima*—is simply speaking as a disinterested, objective “historian” and mere “describer”

⁶⁷ One need only recall the equally extreme, problematic, and no doubt intentionally self-contradictory rhetoric of so many of al-Ghazālī’s classical polemics against the ‘philosophers’ and Shiite ‘esotericists’, for example. See the wide range of examples from various Islamic traditions to be included in our forthcoming sourcebook, *Between the Lines: An Introduction to Islamic Esotericism*.

(or “encyclopedist”⁶⁸) of the Islamic intellectual, artistic, cultural and religious traditions which he discusses. Machiavelli did not write his *Discourses* on Livy for scholars of Latin philology.

⁶⁸ Unless those who have spoken of the *Muqaddima* as an ‘encyclopedia’ are rather disingenuously thinking of the thoroughgoingly polemic and political project of Diderot and his associates. That specific analogy is indeed relevant and illuminating.

Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics

FREDERIC DE JONG & BERND RADTKE (Eds.), 1999

Leiden, Brill

xiii + 831 pp., £/NG???, ISBN 90 04 113002

The remarkable depth and breadth of this volume are such that it is likely to become a classical reference in Islamic Studies for decades to come. The thirty-five highly specialised essays in this volume are the proceedings of a 1995 conference at Utrecht on ‘Sufism and its Opponents’—a considerably more accurate description than the present title, since (as J. Van Ess ironically points out in his opening address), neither mysticism nor spirituality are the subject of any of these studies! Instead, the vast majority of these highly specialised contributions, each focused on a specific cultural region and/or historical period, examine the shifting forms of political and rhetorical opposition to specific institutionalised Sufi ‘orders’ or associated local forms of popular Islamic religious and devotional life over the past eight centuries, with primary emphasis (twenty contributors alone) on polemics reflecting local responses to the familiar challenges of imperialism, Marxist rule and various types of ‘reform’ within the past three centuries. Only four fascinating studies (each by leading authorities) touch on earlier Hanbali, Mu’tazili, Zaydi and Imami attitudes toward the charismatic or ascetic individuals of the formative, ‘classical’ period in Iraq and Iran, prior to the 13th century and the subsequently recurrent figures of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Arabî and ‘Abd al-Wahhâb.

The contributions assembled here are of a uniformly high level of scholarship, in many cases representing the fruits of a life’s work of specialised historical study. Accordingly, fellow specialists will delight in the abundance of new references to related sources and studies on often unfamiliar regions of the Islamic world. However, uninitiated readers without a high level of related academic background and interest will probably find this heavy going, since the usual

focus of each essay on localised polemics and struggles for power and public ‘authority’ means that the actual wider forms of religious and devotional life and practice in question—as well as many of the deeper currents of political, social and cultural change underlying those fragmentary polemics—are normally silently assumed by both the original Muslim authors and their specialised students here, with their readers being left to supply those indispensable (and often more interesting) wider contexts. Thus the practical outcome and profound challenges involved in situating each case-study may be compared, for example, to our attempting to reconstruct something of the actual social and cultural realities of recent American religious life—from the perspective of another culture substantially distant in time and space—solely through the analysis of a handful of the surviving polemics and controversies (both learned and popular) between the hundreds of shifting Protestant denominations (to mention only a single analogous element) partly underlying those larger realities.

By far the most important contribution of this volume for Islamic Studies (within the wider field of religious studies) is the broader and more reliable comparative perspective provided by the organisers’ careful inclusion of in-depth studies, at very different periods, of what were too long considered ‘peripheral’ and certainly unfairly neglected regions of the wider Islamic world. Indeed the vast majority of these studies deal precisely with such previously neglected areas: five on China and neighbouring Central Asia, four on Indonesia and Malaysia, five on sub-Saharan Africa and the Sudan, and four from pre-partition India. The comparison and contrast of so many detailed case-studies within the same cultural region is a remarkable help in more accurately contextualising and often questioning familiar stereotypes about broader developments in the ‘Islamic World’, such as the spread of ‘Wahhâbî’ ideas and norms, or the development of diverse forms of ‘Neo-Sufism’ (B. Radtke’s neologism here) in response to such

criticisms of ‘innovation’. Equally important for the student of Islam are the longer-term, diachronic studies of the constantly shifting sociology of religious authority within a given region (here including al-Andalus, Zaydi Yemen, Ottoman Algeria, Eastern Turkistan, and the earlier Ottoman empire), or of the ongoing literary life of recurrent polemic themes (in M. Chodkiewicz’s magisterial discussion of ‘le procès posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabî’).

In short, despite the fragmenting effects of recent area studies and nationalistic emphases, disciplinary specialisations, and the public clamour of contemporary religious polemics, the editors and learned contributors to this volume have brought together a remarkably rich, useful and thought-provoking comparative ‘sourcebook’ which will be indispensable for interested students of Islamic Studies in all its equally indispensable historical and contemporary dimensions.

Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam, by Alexander D. Knysh. Albany, SUNY Press, 1999 (xvi + 449 pages).

Students of Islamic social, religious and intellectual history have long been aware of the central role played for centuries, in virtually every region of the Islamic world, by a certain recurrent polemic "image" of Ibn 'Arabi--one with little or no foundation in either the famous mystic's life or the actual content of his writings--in disputes involving such well-studied figures as Ibn Taymiya, Sirhindi, Simnani (and Kashani), Ibn Khaldun and even recent Egyptian national politics. Many other less-studied episodes from Ottoman, Mogul, Safavid and southeast Asian Islamic history have suggested that those incidents are perhaps only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg," and studies by O. Yahya and M. Chodkiewicz have pointed out the extensive available sources for a more wide-ranging examination of that remarkably persistent polemic tradition. Thus Prof. Knysh's long-awaited study adds another set of important episodes helping to illuminate the genesis of that "polemical image". However, this massively erudite compilation (107 pages of dense footnotes and almost 40 pages of bibliographic references) is clearly intended for a scholarly audience intimately familiar with the issues and personalities in question, with few concessions even to Islamicists from other fields (much less the "educated public"), so the following remarks are intended not only to indicate the contents of this book, but also to suggest something of the contexts (and limitations) which must be understood and provided by each reader in order to appreciate the wider significance of the episodes summarized here.

One must begin--as with so many books in Islamic studies these days--by insisting that it is the *subtitle* which in fact accurately describes the contents and context of this volume. As the author himself repeatedly indicates, and as even cursory readers of this journal are surely well aware, the polemic tradition in question at best provides a helpful set of indirect clues to the massive influence of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, disciples and schools of thought and even wider forms of spiritual practice more loosely associated with his work down to the present day. More importantly, Prof. Knysh's case-studies are almost entirely limited to authors from the central Arab-speaking lands (with one chapter on a handful of Maghrebi writers and another on a work of Taftazani composed in Damascus) writing in the 150 years following Ibn 'Arabi's death in 1258 (in any case, prior to the Ottoman empire), immediately following the Crusades,

Reconquista and the devastating Mongol invasions. This was (until recently, at least) a little-studied period of intense religious and institutional creativity, forging a wide range of new institutions, artistic, social and intellectual forms which furthered the spread of Islam, as a *world-religion*, into new areas of Asia and central Europe and which eventually came to characterize the normative Islam of those regions until at least the 19th century. Throughout this creative period, Muslims from the most diverse religious, cultural and artistic standpoints turned to the writings of Ibn 'Arabi not only to inspire, but also--and this is the crux of the perennial polemic whose origins are outlined here--above all to *justify* those new forms of cultural and religious life.

Thus the wider historical significance of the polemics examined by Prof. Knysh lies (on both sides, although his book concentrates almost entirely on the detractors in this debate) in their indirect role, as the reactions of a conservative learned elite to those far-reaching creative developments, in helping us to appreciate the detailed social and political dynamics of those cumulatively decisive changes in their various local contexts. His individual case studies are most informative and most potentially significant when they enable readers to go beyond the sterile rhetorical gestures repeated almost unchanged over centuries, so that they can begin to appreciate the actual local political and social issues active in each case. In this regard, most non-specialist readers will probably gain the most by beginning their reading with pages 49-60, where Prof. Knysh beautifully summarizes the particular political, social and institutional contexts underlying these polemics in the nascent Mamluk (and late Ayyubid) regime. While the particulars of that single situation are of course not applicable to the other cases he discusses, readers will at least be aware that similar constellations of locally disputed power, authority (in many domains) and change (and resistance to change) can be understood to underlie each of the other polemics he discusses.

To take the original case-studies in order, chapter 2 begins with the earliest biographers (including contemporaries) of Ibn 'Arabi, where Prof. Knysh points out that there is in fact virtually no sign of polemical issues or controversial behavior--including both the *ad hominem* characteristics cited by later detractors or the more flagrant *karamat* mentioned by later supporters--in those early writings. Particularly interesting here are the somewhat distanced perspectives of contemporary Sufi observers--to which one could add the similar personal observations of Shams-e Tabriz, recorded in Aflaki's famous Mevlevi hagiography. Chapter 3,

on the scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Salam, is interesting primarily by way of illustrating in detail for naive modern readers--as anyone who has worked with Islamic *tabaqat* and related materials at any period soon comes to realize--the multitude of ways that later writers were not only unashamed, but in fact fervidly creative, *re*-writers of earlier "historical" materials in order to further their own contemporary (and often highly personal) polemical purposes. What is most important at this crucial historical point--and which constitutes, as it were, a key "missing" chapter of the overall story (available, at best, only to a handful of specialists)--is the larger picture of the rapid initial spread not only of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings (especially the Fusus al-Hikam), but also of the "monist" (*wujudiya*) literatures, both learned and especially poetic, associated with such key Arabic authors as Ibn Sab'in, al-Shushtari, and Ibn al-Farid.

For the next section (chapt. 4) summarizes Ibn Taymiya's extensive and--as is often the case with his remarks--*relatively* nuanced and well-informed critiques which, as Knysh rightly observes, (a) have tended to set the tone for virtually all the later condemnations (from a vast range of intellectual and sectarian positions), particularly in their restriction to a handful of "shocking" *topoi* drawn piecemeal from the Fusus; and (b) are totally tendentious and unreliable, in their focus on the pretended ethical and religious dangers of "monism", either as characterizations or as critiques of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings. Indeed, on a more positive note, in highlighting Ibn Taymiya's generally positive appreciation of a wide range of Ibn 'Arabi's works (including the Futuhat) prior to his discovery of the Fusus, Prof. Knysh actually introduces a key theme and important qualification to which he returns in each subsequent chapter: i.e., the distinctive *ambivalence* of almost all learned critics who are known to have actually *read* any of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, whether that be expressed in the pointed ambiguity and diversity of their remarks for different audiences and occasions, or in those many cases where a prudent attitude of public "hostility" is frequently belied by other evidence--as in a telling contemporary anecdote concerning the late Fazlur Rahman--of private reading, study and even teaching. Given Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive style of writing, any serious study of his work is necessarily a demanding (one might even say lifelong) task, and the active engagement of mind and spirit required to begin to understand his intentions, on even the most superficial level, is profoundly incompatible with a "polemic" attitude of any description.

Indeed the recurrent citation of public book-burnings and the frequent executions and other tribulations of scholars caught up in local political intrigues--dramatic incidents that are

perhaps especially numerous in the revealing chapter 7 (on "Ibn 'Arabi in the Muslim West")--are an indispensable reminder of the mysteries, for the non-expert reader, and often unexplored *particularities* of each of the specific socio-political contexts actually underlying the "polemics" in question; the historian who digs deeply enough inevitably discovers that the battles in question involved far more than words and theological concepts. (Cf. the similar role of Marxist-Leninist polemics in Stalinist Russia or other socialist regimes.) In this regard, for readers with limited background, the discussion of the life and fate of the famous Grenadan vizier and litterateur Ibn al-Khatib (one of the rare "defenders" of Ibn 'Arabi discussed in any detail here) is a particularly vivid painting of the extraordinary circumstances facing creative intellectual and religious spirits in many regions at this time. However, one of the important virtues of Prof. Knysh's juxtaposition of so many cases from a fairly limited time-period is to highlight the primacy--in actual historical terms--of the *particular* local contexts and situations, thereby combating, as he often points out, the misleading stereotypes (of the type "legalism vs. Sufism", "sharia" vs. antinomianism, oppression vs. "liberty", etc.) which often arise from uninformed (or later polemic) encounters with one or another of these disputes. (In this regard, his most detailed case studies demonstrate some of the same clarifying virtues of Carl Ernst's classic study of the actual political contexts of classical Sufi martyrdoms.) One of the especially important "particularities" of Ibn 'Arabi's image (even polemic) in the Maghreb highlighted here is the way it was closely associated at first with his earlier Maghrebi writings--i.e., *not* the Fusus al-Hikam and its philosophic commentators, as typically throughout the later *Mashriq*--and was often directly connected in polemics there (albeit in blatant contradiction with Ibn 'Arabi's own teachings!) with the ongoing North African and Andalusian historical experience of would-be Mahdis and politically active Sufi reformers, or with disputes between various Sufi groups.

Chapters 5 and 8 deal, in historical succession, with a representative range of polemics in Egypt and the central Arab lands, highlighting the repetition of earlier critical motifs--and the frequent ambivalence of '*ulama*' themselves by this time often intimately bound up in the institutions and practices of various forms of Sufism and popular *wali*-centred forms of religious life which had begun to represent influential forms of religious life necessarily finding important support and financing among the Mamluke rulers of Egypt in ways which presaged the dominant structures of Islamic religiosity, far more widely, for centuries to come. If Knysh's account of the deeper background and context of those polemics is relatively summary in those chapters

(and virtually absent in his theological summary of a derivative polemic by the much later Taftazani in chapter 7), his historical approach is far more detailed and helpful in Chapter 9, "Ibn 'Arabi in the Yemen", which constitutes the most detailed and adequate account of the local context of this genre of polemics. There he enables the reader to follow the intrigues and complex power-struggles (and more lasting socio-cultural developments) in which these polemical writings were only one, often relatively superficial weapon, exactly as we can clearly situate and contextualize literally almost identical polemics today in the context of the Egyptian parliament or revolutionary Iran (or at certain points in the past, in light of the detailed contextual studies mentioned in the opening paragraph).

Once we have grasped the local, immediate factors in each of these polemics--and have recognized their unbridgeable distance from actual writings and teachings of Ibn 'Arabi himself--one might still ask if there is not some deeper significance to the recurrence and longevity of this particular polemic, quite apart from the particular historical meanings of each individual case and incident. (This is a particularly challenging question in that each of the world-religious traditions can be seen as being "defined", to some extent, by a range of similarly profound--and long-lived-- internal and external tensions.) Prof. Knysh, in his introductory and concluding remarks, alludes to such questions while suggesting much caution, as befits a conscientious historian. Certainly one is not likely to arrive at an adequate formulation of this deeper question--not to mention any sort of responsible "answer"!--without radically calling into question the fundamental assumptions of the medieval '*ulama*' (which curiously often seem to be presented as accurate and self-evident even in the more analytical passages of this study) regarding their supposedly "authoritative" role in creating, defining, and preserving "religion" and religious "community". And it is worth noting that students of religion who would attempt to formulate that further question in an adequate and comprehensive fashion even today still tend to turn to Ibn 'Arabi, directly or indirectly, and openly or surreptitiously, and increasingly *whatever* the historical religious tradition in question....

Ibn ‘Arabī: *Contemplation of the Holy Mysteries and the Rising of the Divine Lights*, translated by Cecilia Twinch and Pablo Beneito. Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 2001. viii + 128 pages.

This carefully annotated translation of the core sections of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Mashāhid al-asrār al-qudsiyya wa matāli‘ al-anwār al-ilāhiyya* (together with summaries of its preface and long ‘epilogue’), based on the earlier bilingual Arabic edition and Spanish translation by Su‘ād al-Hakīm and Pablo Beneito (Murcia, 1994),¹ makes available to English readers for the first time one of the key works of Ibn ‘Arabī’s earlier Andalusian period. One of the most valuable features of the translators’ annotation is their provision of key selections from the extensive commentaries by Ibn ‘Arabī’s own student Ibn Sawdakīn (in a ms. in his own handwriting, dated 646/1258, claiming to represent Ibn ‘Arabī’s personal oral explanations of the symbolism in question) and by the famous Baghdadi woman Sufī Sitt al-‘Ajam bint al-Nafīs (ms. dated 686/1287, just before her death), which provide an extraordinary window on the historical processes of assimilation and transmission of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings in the period immediately after his death. Ibn Sawdakīn’s remarks clearly mirror the type of complex philosophical-metaphysical approach (the system of divine ‘Presences’ and *tajalliyyāt*) associated with the commentary tradition of Qūnawī and his successors, while the selections from Sitt al-‘Ajam already appear more deeply reflective of the experiential, personal emphases of later practical Sufī traditions. The authors’ helpful Introduction—especially the section on ‘The Style and symbolism of the *Contemplations*’—also provides some invaluable keys, inspired by those earlier commentators, for appreciating the overall structure and organisation of this work.

The distinctive literary structure, style and poetic approach of this remarkable text have clear, indeed explicit, affinities with Niffarī’s *Mawāqif* and his *Mukhātabāt*, familiar to most western audiences today through the pioneering edition and translations of A. J. Arberry. That is, each of the successive fourteen ‘places of witnessing’ that structure this work—stretching from the place of the human spirit’s first ‘existentialisation’ and emergence from God to our place of ultimate judgement and metaphysical ‘return’—is phrased in terms of an intimate, dramatic dialogue with God that always begins with a series of consistently paradoxical divine ‘addresses’ to a mysterious ‘servant/worshipper’ (at once Ibn ‘Arabī himself and, at least by implication,

every human soul as potentially the cosmic ‘Complete Human Being’ [*insān kāmil*]), followed by the equally paradoxical, but always instructive responses of that enlightened human addressee. However, in this case the interplay of divine instruction and human response is far more explicitly ‘pedagogical’, consistently intellectual and overtly symbolic in structure and tone than in the more palpably experiential, directly expressive work of Niffarī (or even in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own more openly and mysteriously autobiographical *K. al-Isrā’*).

What the reader does encounter constantly here, as throughout the wider group of Ibn ‘Arabī’s youthful writings discussed below, is the same profound, seemingly all-encompassing mastery of an infinitely detailed web of symbolic understanding of Islamic scriptures (both Qur’an and hadith, with particular emphasis on the ‘science of (Arabic) letters’ and their numerological equivalents), which is at once deeply personal-experiential and elaborately cosmological and metaphysical.² The ‘contents’ of that symbolism here, as so often in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, defy any attempt at summarisation, but are clearly coherent with all his other known compositions of that same period. And even beginning students of Ibn ‘Arabī will recognise certain central, recurrent themes: for example, (1) the inescapability of ‘paradox’ (from any intellectual perspective) in attempting to describe or reflect on the highest states of spiritual realisation; and (2) the practical necessity of following the paths of actual spiritual realisation (as opposed both to *taqlīd* and to all the intellectual or external-historicist approaches to revelation), (3) through adherence in detail to the actual unique prescriptions of the prophets, together with (4) the indispensable guidance and elaborations of their inspired spiritual ‘heirs’ (the *awliyā’*). These latter three points, in particular, are clearly elaborated in Ibn ‘Arabī’s preface and especially in his long ‘epilogue’, only briefly summarised here, which particularly highlight these fundamental practical lessons of all his lifelong writing and teaching.

¹ The translators also refer (p. 117) to a recent bilingual edition (based on a different manuscript with commentary by S. Qūnawī) and French translation by Stephane Ruspoli (Actes Sud, 1999), which we hope to review in a future issue.

² This peculiarly condensed and abstruse style often literally demands a more extensive commentary on every line of the translation. In a remarkable appendix (pp. 121-126, for the third *mashhad*), the two translators have provided a beautiful sample of the sort of indispensable commentary that is practically required—although it would inevitably be far longer than the original—for revealing the coherence and inner connections of each section of this work.

The translation of this work into English (after earlier Spanish and French versions) only highlights the dramatic emergence and new-found accessibility of a whole ‘family’ of Ibn ‘Arabī’s earlier Andalusian/Maghrebi works composed in a similar style—i.e., an impenetrably hyper-intellectual, poetic, and systematically detailed scriptural symbolism, along with similar thematic content, and their inseparable focus on the inseparability of the author’s (and potentially, each reader’s) direct spiritual illumination and the complex expression of that enlightened understanding in terms of the interplay of corresponding metaphysical levels of cosmogony and eschatological realisation. The first—and for long, virtually the only—accessible representatives of this distinctive family of early writings were the texts edited and translated (in German) by Nyberg almost a century ago; but in the past two decades they have suddenly been joined by editions and translations (in French, English and Spanish) of intimately related texts by Su‘ād al-Hakīm (especially the key *K. al-Isrā’*), D. Gril, G. Elmore, P. Beneito, and P. Fenton and M. Gloton. Indeed, given the actual *symbolic inseparability*—and initial impenetrability!—of each of these early poetic writings, serious students and readers of Ibn ‘Arabī, whatever their background and linguistic preparedness, can only plead for the publishers involved (despite the obvious economic costs) to recognise the fundamental need of serious students in each case for reliable, complete indexes of key symbols and scriptural references from the Qur’an and hadith.

As many readers will notice, the extreme difficulty and complex symbolic allusiveness of these ‘*Contemplations*’ and so many related writings from Ibn ‘Arabī’s youth dramatically highlights the relative clarity and far more open and revealing ‘phenomenological’, directly experiential depth and breadth of the author’s later, ‘Eastern’ period. For his more explicitly detailed writings of that mature period, such as the *Meccan Illuminations* in particular, are practically indispensable for any serious effort at interpreting and understanding otherwise ‘sealed’ earlier texts like these *mashāhid*. There can be little doubt that Ibn ‘Arabī’s autobiographical reference to his receiving a decisive divine instruction, eventually marking out the second half of his active life, to undertake the *nasīha* (practical public spiritual ‘counseling’) of all Muslims and their rulers—not just the spiritual elite—helps to explain this pedagogically key turning towards more discursive prose and more comprehensible, relatively explicit explanations (especially more detailed discussion of earlier spiritual writers and teachers, beyond the Qur’an and selected hadith), an approach which is so sharply contrasted with this

purposefully obscure, albeit sometimes extraordinarily poetic, personal style of his earlier writings.³ Incidentally, there is so far little evidence that the actual meanings or overall ‘contents’ of his teachings actually changed significantly in the course of that profound pedagogical shifting of style and exposition, even if certain modern interpreters (usually motivated by contemporary religious polemics) have occasionally attempted to make such arguments by emphasising only narrowly selected passages of specific works.

Finally, one may hope that the key opening and concluding sections of this text (summarised here on pp. 111-120)⁴ will soon be translated and published in full, as they so richly deserve. Ibn ‘Arabī’s detailed, coherent and extremely explicit arguments there for the indispensable ongoing role—for both individual human beings and the communities which they guide and form—of spiritual insight and illumination, based on and flowing from the proper application and practice of the prophetic revelations and the ongoing guidance and living example of the ‘Friends of God’, are infinitely more than just another scriptural Islamic ‘apology’ for his own personal inspirations or the approaches of long-ago ‘Sufis’. In our present historical circumstances, one would suppose that the unavoidable relevance for every human being—and by no means simply historical or cultural ‘Muslims’—of the immediately practical lessons (and warnings) contained in those poignant and impassioned remarks would be strikingly apparent to every thoughtful reader and student of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work.

³ The often puzzling poetic preludes to each chapter of the *Futūhāt*, along with many passages of later works, are striking reminders that Ibn ‘Arabī certainly did not give up writing, from time to time, in the same difficult style of these youthful works!

⁴ As the authors point out, that conclusion was often circulated as a separate Arabic work, recently edited by H. Taher in *Alif* (Cairo, A.U.C.), 1985, pp. 7-38.

Ibn ‘Arabi: Le dévoilement des effets du voyage. Texte arabe édité, traduit et présenté par Denis Gril. Combas [France], éditions de l’éclat, 1994. [Introduction (pp. i-xxxiii), translation (pp. 1-77), facing Arabic edition and notes (pp. 1-85), and indexes of Qur’anic verses and proper names.]

This new edition and pioneering translation of Ibn ‘Arabi’s K. al-Isfâr ‘an Natâ’ij al-Asfâr--previously accessible only in the defective Hyderabad version of his Rasâ’il--is a fresh reminder of the extraordinary riches still to be discovered among the Shaykh’s dozens of shorter treatises, most of which are not yet available in critical editions. At the same time, this book is the latest landmark in a long series of editions and studies by Professor Gril which--along with recent works by S. al-Hakîm, C. Addas, G. Elmore, and others--are gradually illuminating in much greater detail the historical development and contexts of Ibn ‘Arabi’s many writings, with regard to both form and content. The present work dates from the earlier, Maghrebi period of Ibn ‘Arabi’s life, and Prof. Gril’s translation admirably conveys the richly allusive and poetic style of writing characteristic of that period, a style in which the mystic’s inspiration and experience is typically expressed in the form of a symbolic, mysterious “personal commentary” on certain verses and stories of the Qur’an. Fortunately, the translator’s notes and introductory explanations, based on years of study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the Qur’an (especially in the Futûhât), help to elucidate the manifold allusions of this challenging, compressed and highly personal text.

The structure of this work follows a series of meditations--at first theological and cosmological, then increasingly personal and mystical--based on the Qur’anic descriptions of the “journeys” of Muhammad (the *mi’râj*), Adam (the Fall), Idris/Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob and Joseph, and Moses, whose trials inspire the last third of the entire book. Its remarkably personal form and intention are well summarized in the following passage, which also suggests the characteristic compression, intensity and scope of this outwardly “brief” treatise:

Now this is a sample of *our* share in Lot’s journey. Indeed every journey about which I am speaking is like that: I only speak of it in regard to *my* essence/self; I’m not trying to give an exegesis of their actual story (in the Qur’an). *For these journeys are only bridges and passageways set up so that we can cross over them* (or “interpret” them) *into our own essences/selves and our own particular states.* They are beneficial to

us because God has set them up as a place of passage for us: *“Everything that We recount to you of the stories of the messengers is so that We might strengthen your heart through that. For through this there has come to you the Truth and an admonishment, and a Reminder to all the worlds”* (11:120). And how eloquent is His saying that *“there has come to you through this the Truth”* and *“a Reminder”* of what is within you and in your possession that you have forgotten, so that these stories I’ve recounted to you will remind you of what is within you and what I’ve pointed out to you! For then you will know that you *are* every thing, in every thing, and from every thing.

As this passage should suggest, this is not the sort of treatise whose contents could really be “summarized” in any short review. In fact, as Prof. Gril points out, many passages and allusions of this work are later developed at much greater length, and usually in more accessible language, in various chapters of the Meccan Illuminations.

However, one of the fascinating features of this work (shared by his other writings from the same early period) is its consistently personal tone and the corresponding revelation, from time to time, of Ibn 'Arabî's own distinctively *personal* perceptions and insights. One striking example, at the very beginning (pp. 9-11), is his explanation--based on a famous hadith about the special spiritual rewards of those who will continue to strive for God in the corrupted circumstances of the “latter days”--of the way that the inner realities of the spiritual world (*barzakh*) will become more and more manifest and accessible, at least to the saints and friends of God, as the Hour approaches. Such revealing passages illuminate Ibn 'Arabî's own personality and self-conception, while they can also provide indispensable “keys” for deciphering other more cryptic allusions, in later works, to his deeper understanding of Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi and the “manifestation” (*zuhûr*) of the messianic age.

The bilingual presentation of this translation, with facing Arabi text, will be greatly appreciated by all readers able to benefit from both languages, and the careful scientific edition (based on early manuscripts used by Qûnawî and Fanârî, among others) is complemented by abundant notes, including necessary explanations of hadith and Qur'an allusions, and cross-references to parallel developments in the Futûhât and other later works. As the above remarks indicate, the translation and edition alike presuppose a fairly thorough acquaintance with Ibn 'Arabî's work and its wider Islamic background; an eventual English version for a wider public might require more extensive notes and explanations. However, the bilingual publication of this

remarkable text, like the comparable Arabic-Spanish edition of Ibn 'Arabî's Mashâhid al-Asrâr (by S. Hakîm and P. Beneito) appearing in the same year, is another encouraging sign of the development of an increasingly sophisticated and well-informed international audience already familiar with the broad outlines of the Shaykh's thought, and ready to move on to a deeper appreciation of its depths and perennial significance.

The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination. By WILLIAM C. CHITTICK. Albany, NY: STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1989. Pp. xxii + 478. \$24.50 paper; \$74.50 cloth.

This new book is the first English introduction to Ibn 'Arabî's truly magnum opus, the Meccan Illuminations, and the first introduction designed to prepare non-specialist readers to explore that famous mystic's writings on their own. (That a work of almost 500 double-column pages can still be termed an introduction is a reflection at once of the breadth of Ibn 'Arabî's own ambitions, the very length of the *Futûhât* itself--a text as prolix as his more widely read *Fusûs al-Hikam* is condensed--and the ongoing "volume" of that writer's influence in later Islamic civilization.) Previous scholarly works on Ibn 'Arabî, including the classical studies by Nyberg, Asin-Palacios, Corbin and Izutsu, have typically sought to present what those authors believed to be most relevant or interesting to their own diverse modern audiences. Whatever the merits of those different approaches, only readers already well acquainted with the Arabic texts can judge how adequately they have succeeded and to what extent their interpretations (as is almost inevitable) have taken on a creative life and direction of their own. Thus the specific focus on Ibn 'Arabî's own aims in this most recent study is not simply a function of the anthologizing method--which could easily have been applied to generate yet another "system," as with the earlier Islamic commentators on whom Prof. Chittick has written in the past. More importantly, it also reflects an ongoing, collective scholarly effort that has done much in recent years to bring into clearer focus the particular intellectual and social historical contexts of Ibn 'Arabî's (and many other Sufis') writing and teaching, thereby freeing the study of his creative personal contributions and often highly original perspectives from centuries of later philosophic and poetic reworkings and religious polemics that came to be associated with his name. (Those efforts have been summarized especially in recent major biographical studies by M. Chodkiewicz and C. Addas, soon to be available in English translation.)

The overall presentation and order of subjects in this volume is that adopted by Ibn 'Arabî himself (following earlier Kalam) in the doctrinal sections within his own Introduction to the *Futûhât*: it begins with the cosmic theological and ontological context of human action (Parts 1-3 here), and then continues with the processes and pitfalls of spiritual realization (the "Return", Parts 4-7), which for this mystic involve above all the indispensable role of the symbolic imagination (hence the subtitle of this work). But while this division might suggest the sort of

systematic, abstract philosophic approach so typical of subsequent Muslim commentators, from Qûnawî on down to Mullâ Sadrâ and Sabzawârî, readers will find that Prof. Chittick's careful reliance on Ibn ʿArabî's own words, through nearly 700 translated passages selected from the entire *Futûhât*, happily gives a very different and much more readable picture. In fact the second, epistemological part of this work actually conveys the human, experiential "inside" (the bâtin) of what was first presented in far more abstract terms in such a way that students familiar with cognate religious literature from different religious traditions will quickly grasp the common principles and concerns expressed here in a complex symbolic vocabulary grounded in the Qur'an and hadîth.

But the very difficult opening theological and philosophic discussions do provide the common language (primarily Qur'anic) and conceptual framework that is assumed throughout Ibn ʿArabî's writings; and this is certainly the aspect of his work most unfamiliar to virtually all modern readers. (The translator, as explained on p. xxi, has prudently put off for a separate, later volume a promised survey of the mystic's cosmology, cosmogony and influential theories concerning the macro- and micro-cosmic "Perfect Man".) The remaining two-thirds of the work, however, are devoted to the more practical side of Ibn ʿArabî's writing, a careful "spiritual phenomenology" of the intimate dialectic between scriptural sources and guidelines, rational considerations, and personal spiritual experience (the *naql*, *ʿaql* and *kashf* of so many generations of later commentators), deeply rooted in earlier Sufism and Islamic spirituality, which is the central leitmotif of all of Ibn ʿArabî's teaching. Throughout the work, both in notes to the translation and his own explanatory passages, Prof. Chittick has especially emphasized and carefully identified the Islamic scriptural framework and inspiration of all of Ibn ʿArabî's writing (sometimes neglected in earlier presentations). As a result, the extensive (and reliable) indexes of Qur'anic verses, hadîth sources and technical terms will no doubt provide a helpful working tool for students of both earlier and later Sufi traditions. (Indeed this volume now provides perhaps the best available English example of a coherent, comprehensive commentary on the entire Qur'an.)

Finally, a word of praise--and a simultaneous caution--is required concerning the method of translation and broader pedagogical approach adopted here. Students of Ibn ʿArabî, beginning with the earliest commentators, have always had to wrestle with his incredibly creative, multi-leveled use of Arabic language and scriptural symbolism; and interpreters for a modern audience

(above all given the immense scope of the *Futûhât*), are faced with the additional problem of explaining detailed scriptural references and technical vocabularies in the vast range of Islamic disciplines that were relatively familiar in the original context. Throughout these faithful and close translations, Prof. Chittick has typically selected a single English word to translate the corresponding Arabic term, and has carefully introduced the many complementary meanings of those key terms (often using Ibn ʿArabî's own explanations) at their first occurrence. This has the obvious--indeed indispensable--advantage of obliging readers to enter into the mystic's own resonant semantic and symbolic universe, but could lead to grave misunderstandings for those who might happen to skip over (over eventually forget) the full original explanations.

The same careful pedagogical aims are expressed throughout the organization and selection of translations in the book as a whole. This is not in any way the sort of anthology or popular sourcebook that one could pick up to discover "Ibn ʿArabî's views" on a particular question, or that is designed to outline his "mystical philosophy". It is designed and organized as a whole in such a way that the topics and translations in each section integrally build on and presuppose material first presented in earlier chapters: thus it is essential, for students not already intimately familiar with these texts, to read this book through carefully from the very beginning. The result of that approach, for those who can devote the requisite attention to this study, is that they will truly be prepared to appreciate the profound inseparability of form from the "content" and operative intentions of Ibn ʿArabî's own writings, whose distinctive rhetoric was never really imitated even within later Islamic tradition. Like other classics in that tradition, but with its own unique style, the *Futûhât* was meant to mirror each reader's state while gradually drawing them into an intimate process of discovery involving the whole being: readers of this volume will be able to see how that is so, and continue their explorations.

Ibn ʿArabî. *La vie merveilleuse de Dhû-l-Nûn l'Égyptien*. Translated by Roger Deladrière. Paris, éditions de Sindbad, 1988. 404 pages; 230 Fr.

The images that come to mind when one speaks of "hagiography" or "lives of the saints" say a great deal about the particular religious history that has helped shape our own language and culture. So it should not be surprising if the English language, even in scholarly discourse, still lacks so many of the basic distinctions that would be needed to do justice to a religion whose learned disciplines are almost entirely grounded in the "hagiographic" records of hadîth and Sîra, and whose extraordinarily diverse popular manifestations have always been rooted in the living examples (and subsequent veneration) of thousands of awliyâ', or "Friends of God". Recent scholarship has only begun to reveal the fundamental role of the multi-faceted conceptions of sainthood (walâya) in Ibn ʿArabî's own understanding of Islam--and the profound relevance of those perspectives for illuminating the ongoing relations between the learned and "popular" forms of Islam. Now Prof. Deladrière's discovery and translation of Ibn ʿArabî's lengthy treatment of this famous early Muslim saint (ca. 155/771-246/861) provides a remarkable concrete illustration of spiritual phenomena and teachings that are discussed--often in more abstract theological terms--throughout his immense "Meccan Revelations" (*al-Futûhât al-Makkîya*). This particular book was written after the *Futûhât*, relatively late in Ibn ʿArabî's life, which may account for the rarity of manuscripts and its absence from the author's own *Fihrist* and subsequent bio-bibliographical studies.

Ibn ʿArabî's explanation of his own aims in composing this work (in the Prologue, pp. 47-53) is highly reminiscent of the autobiographical hagiographic materials familiar to many readers from the Sufis of Andalusia (transl. R. Austin). Like the anecdotes of Ibn ʿArabî's own masters and companions in the *Rûh al-Quds* and *al-Durrat al-Fâkhira*, these stories, poems, prayers and concise sayings of Dhû-l-Nûn are brought together here in order to awaken and intensify his readers' own spiritual desire (himma) to emulate these examples of the spiritual life, and to avoid the recurrent dangers that they also so clearly highlight. But although these sayings are all handed down from earlier disciples and hagiographic collections--usually, Ibn ʿArabî insists, by direct oral transmission (as with hadîth of the Prophet)--the cumulative effect of this personal collection is radically different from a literary "anthology" or more historical account. In fact, careful readers should have a vivid sense of actually participating in a majlis, of watching Ibn ʿArabî's own method of oral spiritual teaching as he repeatedly interjects his own explanations

and personal anecdotes, explaining or corroborating the actual relevance of Dhû-l-Nûn's words in regard to both doctrine and practice.

The book itself--following Prof. Deladrière's thorough and indispensable Introduction (pp. 11-45)--is divided into four main sections. Part I outlines the few known historical "facts" about Dhû-l-Nûn's life (including his early training in hadîth and later persecution in Egypt and brief imprisonment by the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil at the end of his life), and gives a representative sampling of his teachings, his prayers and special spiritual accomplishments (karamât). Part II is an extremely dense compilation of the walî's sayings and aphorisms regarding some sixty different spiritual virtues and related problems of discipline and practice, constituting an elaborate "spiritual psychology". (Prof. Deladrière's corresponding "Index de la spiritualité", pp. 386-391, includes hundreds of Arabic technical terms drawn from the Qur'ân, hadîth and early Sufî tradition.) Part III is divided between Dhû-l-Nûn's poetic allusions to members or ranks of the ever-present "spiritual hierarchy" of the *awliyâ'*--a central concern of Ibn ʿArabî throughout the *Futûhât*--and some forty edifying tales of Dhû-l-Nûn's own dramatic encounters with a fascinating array of ascetics, solitary worshippers, pilgrims and "fools of God" who variously teach, inspire or caution him during the years of his own spiritual wanderings (siyâha) in a quest that extended from the Maghreb to Syria, Yemen and perhaps even Khorasan. Finally, Part IV includes many further illustrations of each of these genres of Sufî writing, drawn from an earlier hagiographic compilation by Ibn Bâkûya. These dramatic descriptions of Dhû-l-Nûn's spiritual encounters are no doubt the most interesting and approachable genre for non-specialist readers, and it is especially striking that in many of these stories (at least 18) the famous protagonist is depicted as being instructed by women saints and ascetics from virtually all parts of that early Islamic world, including the woman saint (walîya) who is specifically cited as his "master", the famous Fâtima of Nishapur (also known for her connections with the early Persian mystic, Abû Yazîd al-Bastâmî).

Apart from these very accessible stories, some of them familiar from the anecdotes of Dhû-l-Nûn continually retold by later Sufî writers, the particular rhetorical form of Arabic "rhymed prose" (*sajʿ*) in which the rest of his prayers and teachings are usually cast presents almost insuperable obstacles for any translator into an Indo-European language. (One is reminded of the remarkable absence of any readable Western translation of the *Nahj al-Balâgha*, the even more famous and influential collected sayings of ʿAlî ibn Abî Tâlib, a compilation

which resembles the form and content of these teachings of Dhû-l-Nûn in so many fundamental respects.) Prof. Deladrière is to be commended for his truly remarkable efforts to transmute these masterpieces of that peculiar Arabic form into comprehensible French: Dhû-l-Nûn's meanings here are almost always clear, even if the aesthetic appeal of the underlying Arabic (its rhyme, concision, allusiveness, mnemonic power, and the like) is inevitably lost in translation. At the very least every reader, even those encountering Dhû-l-Nûn for the first time, will come away with a strong sense of this saint's distinctive "spiritual personality," with its especially marked ascetic, other-worldly tendencies.

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Apart from successfully meeting the challenge of translation, Prof. Deladrière has also undertaken a painstaking effort to uncover the relevant historical background and to compare the original and intermediary sources for these teachings of Dhû-l-Nûn with parallel or later Islamic uses of the same materials (e.g., by Attâr, Suyûfî, etc.)--including Ibn ʿArabî's use of them in other works, especially the *Futûhât* (where the "wise counsels" in his concluding chapter 560 include dozens of Dhû-l-Nûn's sayings also recorded here) and his as yet untranslated *Muhâdarât al-Abrâr*. These demanding scholarly explorations--which are equally evident in Prof. Deladrière's Introduction, lengthy notes and appendices (pp. 349-391), and his alternative versions of many stories and sayings--should be a great help both to specialized students of Ibn ʿArabî and to cultural and social historians of the Islamic world during the centuries between Dhû-l-Nûn and the Shaykh al-Akbar. Simply comparing these 300 pages of translations (by no means exhaustive of the earlier surviving sources) with the few paragraphs on Dhû-l-Nûn in any of the major Islamic encyclopedias and reference works on Sufism should suggest the magnitude of investigations as yet hardly begun. Similarly extensive bodies of hagiographic material exist for other key formative figures in what later came to be "Sufi" tradition (as we know from the pioneering studies of Hallâj, Muhâsibî, and Sahl al-Tustarî), but the detailed comparative study of the origins and literary transformations of that vast material has scarcely begun.

The period of Dhû-l-Nûn's own long life was one in which virtually all the "religious sciences" and institutional forms of teaching and guidance that came to typify later Islamic religious culture suddenly seem to spring up--judging by the surviving literary and historical evidence--in remarkably differentiated and sophisticated form. In this case, the contrast between

Dhû-l-Nûn's early studies of hadîth (with Mâlik and others) and his subsequent critical attitude toward the worldly corruption of hadîth scholars and legalists (and his resulting imprisonment) is symptomatic of wider, historically decisive transformations. And the complex development of his technical terminology for "spiritual phenomenology", including the transmutation of secular Arabic love poetry, proverbs and storytelling for spiritual purposes, is an even more important illustration of these formative developments of Islamic tradition. Prof. Deladrière's exploration of the many earlier sources for these sayings and stories should help Islamic historians to begin to work out to what degree those critical developments were actually due to a "historical" Dhû-l-Nûn (and hence no doubt to earlier, anonymous figures) and how much they represent the gradual, cumulative creation of later mystical and literary traditions. But for Ibn ʿArabî and later Muslim readers, of course, the only Dhû-l-Nûn who mattered is the "friend of God" (*walî Allâh*) whose life and teachings are so vividly and copiously revealed in this book.

Ibn ʿArabi. *Traité de l'Amour*. Translated by Maurice Gloton. Paris: Albin Michel, 1986. 320 pages.

The importance of Ibn ʿArabi's extensive discussion of divine and human love in chapter 178 of the *Futūhāt* was already recognized by Asin-Palacios and Henry Corbin, both of whom had translated substantial excerpts in their pioneering studies of the Shaykh al-Akbar. (Indeed the whole of Corbin's *Creative Imagination...* can be seen as an extended meditation on the central theme of *khayāl* in this chapter.) Now, however, a much wider audience can appreciate the full richness and complexity of this remarkable work thanks to this new translation of the entire chapter. And many readers will surely agree with the Mr. Gloton's description of this text as a "masterpiece", since it is difficult to think of any other translated work of Ibn ʿArabi that does such justice to all the key dimensions of his thought and teaching: his metaphysical doctrines, religious and scriptural concerns, and practical spiritual outlook are continually interwoven here in a way that constantly reminds each reader of the relevance of each of those perspectives to his own innermost experience and conceptions of the world.

The structure of this largely self-contained treatise is relatively straightforward. As in each chapter of the *Futuhat*, Ibn ʿArabi begins with a poetic introduction summarizing all the major themes taken up in the later discussion as they have been realized and transmuted in his own experience. That is followed by what is at once a phenomenological evocation of the full range of aspects of the experience of love and an initial outline of the essential vocabulary and symbolism--drawn from both the remarkably subtle language and imagery of Arabic love-poetry and the equally rich scriptural indications in the Koran and hadith--that provides the basis for Ibn ʿArabi's subsequent analyses of the inner reality of love. The following chapters (pp. 67-134) then develop, still in fairly abstract or highly symbolic terms, his complex understanding (as usual, both ontological and theological) of the ultimate reality of divine Love and its human manifestations in spiritual and "natural/physical" love. And the remainder of the discussion (pp. 135-262) turns to the practical means of fully realizing and integrating that divine reality as they have been described and manifested by the prophets and saints.

What makes Ibn ʿArabi's discussions here so consistently alive and fascinating is his artful combination of abstract metaphysical analysis and scriptural allusion with striking

anecdotes and accounts of his own spiritual experiences and those of other Sufis (here especially of women mystics, including some of his own early Andalusian teachers). Since that "experiential" side begins with detailed discussions of romantic love and attachment (drawing mainly on the language of earlier Arabic poetry) in terms recognizable to virtually everyone, each reader--including those with no consciously spiritual or "religious" interest in this subject--is artfully drawn into Ibn ʿArabi's dialectic, and only gradually brought face-to-face with the full practical implications of his contrast between the integrative wholeness of "divine love" and more familiar human experiences of dissociation, incompleteness, illusion.... As such, this work is itself a beautiful illustration of that providential divine "ruse" (*makar*) by which, as he points out (p. 139), "*God treats those who love Him [i.e., all His creatures], bringing them back to Him by their own will or by force.*"

Now of course the central role of Love (not just man's awakening love of God, but the very Ground of all being) was also celebrated endlessly, and often incomparably, in the famous mystical poets of the Eastern Islamic world. And the full richness and density of this work--as well as the particular emphases and characteristic intentions of Ibn ʿArabi's teaching--will emerge most clearly for readers who are able to make that comparison. As always, one of those most striking characteristics is his continual insistence on the perspectives evoked here as being in fact the central, all-encompassing aim of the prophetic Message, and on the practical consequences of that insistence, a focus that continually forces his attentive reader to reconsider apparently familiar aspects of the Qur'an and hadith.

Mr. Gloton deserves special thanks for his generally reliable translation of an often extraordinarily difficult text, especially where the complex linguistic distinctions of Arabic love poetry are concerned. His notes help to explain the numerous allusions to hadith and Qur'an, as well as Ibn ʿArabi's frequent use of Arabic etymologies, and the index of Qur'anic citations and index/glossary of Arabic technical terms will be especially useful to students comparing this with the Shaykh's other writings. Given the importance of this text, one may hope that his contribution will one day inspire a full English translation (from the original Arabic) and commentary, which would be a great service not only to those interested in Ibn ʿArabi or Sufism, but to students of Islam more generally.

IBN 'ARABI: *La Niche des lumières: 101 saintes paroles prophétiques*, introduction and translation by Muhammad Valsan, Paris, Editions de l'Oeuvre, 1983; and *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in early Islam*, by William A. Graham, Paris/the Hague, Mouton, 1977.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the fundamental importance of hadith--the vast body of traditional reports concerning the sayings and actions of the Prophet--not only for the constitution and elaboration of Islamic law and theology (which are the uses of hadith most often emphasized by modern scholars), but also for Islamic piety and spirituality more generally, whether in their popular or more learned manifestations. This focus on the spiritual dimension of hadith, important as it is in Sufi literature in general, no doubt finds its most elaborate and rigorous expression in the writings of Ibn 'Arabi; it is especially evident in the *Futuhat*, where the Shaykh's interpretation of those Prophetic sayings (on the most diverse subjects) provides the essential framework for dozens of chapters, being at least as important as--and indeed inseparable from--his understanding of the Qur'an itself.

Hence this new French translation, with facing Arabic text, of the *Mishkat al-Anwar*, Ibn 'Arabi's own personal selection of 101 hadith (or parts thereof), offers an invaluable aid for all serious students of his work, especially those without Arabic. For the particular hadith included in this selection recur constantly throughout his writings (including the *Fusus*), like so many leitmotifs or themes around which his thought is constructed; yet those recurrent allusions (which are far more frequent than the cases of detailed exegesis) are rarely identified as such in most available translations. The near-scriptural importance of these particular hadith, as indicated by the Arabic title of the collection ("The Niche of Lights Concerning the Reports Which Are Transmitted From God"), also flows from the fact that they are all "divine" or "holy sayings" (*hadith ilahi* or *qudsi*), i.e., ones in which Muhammad (or in some cases an earlier prophet) reports God's own words, either directly or as transmitted by Gabriel. Their contents, accordingly, are primarily centered on spiritual, ethical and eschatological questions, often reminiscent of Biblical passages; but their Islamic sources are in fact most often to be found in the respected "Six Books" or canonical collections of Sunni hadith.

Mr. Valsan's very readable translation is limited strictly to Ibn 'Arabi's own prefatory remarks and the divine sayings themselves, with virtually no explanatory annotation or references to their uses and interpretations in Ibn 'Arabi's other works. (Only the first reporter [and eventual literary source] of the *isnād*, or long chain of oral transmitters, has been translated

in most cases; but the complete text is included in the fully voweled Arabic version on facing pages.) However, the translator's compact introduction (pp. 7-14) does provide some essential background: he points out the lifelong nature of Ibn 'Arabi's interest in hadith, mentioning the teachers and transmitters with whom he studied in many parts of the Islamic world; he cites the Shaykh's dozen or more other selections or studies of hadith (largely taken from the canonical collections), most of which are now lost and known only by their titles; he briefly alludes to his distinctive Sufi position (outlined in several passages of the *Futuhāt* and other works) concerning the spiritual "authenticity" of hadith, as contrasted with the traditional Islamic methods of *isnad*-criticism; and finally, he summarizes Ibn 'Arabi's own indications concerning the structure and sources of this particular selection.

The *Mishkat* itself is divided into three parts: two sets of 40 hadith--thereby fulfilling the famous Prophetic injunction concerning the special merit of those who preserve and transmit 40 of his sayings--and an additional 21, for a total of 101 (because, according to still another hadith [p. 104], "God loves the uneven number"). The first 40 hadith are given with the complete *isnad* from Ibn 'Arabi's own teachers back to the Prophet, while for the others he cites only his literary sources (and their chain of sources).

Since the traditional corpus of "divine sayings" poses certain obvious problems concerning their nature and status in relation to both the Koran and the other Prophetic hadith, Mr. Valsan has also included as an appendix a brief translation of a fascinating discussion of this question by two later Sufis (of the 17th/18th century). Apparently he was unaware of the far more elaborate examination of the Islamic literature on these questions--and of the *hadith qudsi* in its broader relations to the Koran and the other hadith--in Wm. Graham's *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*. If we mention that pioneering work here, however, it is because Professor Graham has actually provided detailed analyses and carefully annotated English translations (again with full Arabic texts and canonical or other 'sources') of roughly half the hadith from the *Mishkat al-Anwar* in the latter half of his work (pp. 111-244), which is devoted to the many "divine sayings" found in the classical hadith collections. Through it, even readers without French or Arabic can still discover many of these key sources of Ibn 'Arabi's reflection. Prof. Graham clearly identifies those canonical hadith from his sample which are included in some form in the *Mishkat*, but the usefulness of his work is not limited to supplying those translations. As a result of his careful comparison of the often quite different versions of a given

saying in those early sources, readers interested in the literary or rhetorical composition of the Shaykh's works can more easily explore the often intriguing process by which he chose among those alternative versions. For although his citations are indeed literal, for the most part, it should not be surprising if what he leaves out or refrains from mentioning is sometimes as revealing as the text he actually chooses to quote.

In conclusion, these two complementary studies offer a fascinating insight into one of the most important (if still virtually unstudied) "sources" of the thought of Ibn 'Arabi, and ultimately of Sufism and Islamic spirituality in the broadest sense.

Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran. By Henry Corbin (translated by N. Pearson). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977 (pb. reprint, 1989); Bollingen Series XCI:2. xviii + 374 pp.

While this classic study, first published in 1960, is surely familiar to specialists in Islamic philosophy, mysticism and Shiite thought, this paperback re-edition of the Bollingen translation now makes available to a wider audience, at a price affordable for classroom use, what is probably still the best available English anthology of later Islamic thought and a marvelous introduction to the "spiritual aesthetics" of poetry and the visual arts (and the religious perception of nature), in both Sunni and Shiite Islam. This volume actually includes two very different books: the lyrical, highly personal Eranos lecture aptly described by the title (pp. 3-105, originally published in the Eranos-Jahrbuch for 1953); and a carefully selected, easily readable and pedagogically more useful selection of key texts focusing on the "metaphysics of the imagination" in four major schools of later Islamic thought. While longer works by a few of those thinkers (notably Mulla Sadra and Ibn ʿArabî) have since become available in complete English translations, in this case the broad range of sources, combined with the careful focus on a single major topic and extensive annotation, still make the translations in this volume an ideal pedagogical tool for survey or introductory courses in Islamic (or Persian) religion, civilization, arts, etc.

The long translation section (pp. 107-end) includes key passages on the common theme of the epistemology (and metaphysics) of spiritual perception--often phrased in terms of eschatological symbolism from the Qur'an and hadîth--drawn from representative works by Suhrâwardî, Ibn ʿArabî, Mulla Sadra and Shaykh Ahmad Ahsâ'î. In each case Corbin has joined short excerpts from these seminal thinkers with commentaries or further illustrations of their insights by their students or later disciples (e.g., Qaysarî and ʿAbd al-Karîm Jîlî for Ibn ʿArabî; Shahrâzûrî, Ibn Kammûna and Qutb al-Dîn Shîrâzî for Suhrâwardî), in a way that beautifully conveys the usual forms of writing and teaching within those Islamic intellectual traditions. And although Corbin's personal interest is clearly focused on the later (Safavid and Qajar) Shiite authors, who were still virtually unknown outside Iran at the time this book was written, in fact half of the 14 texts translated here are by Sunni writers from the traditions of Suhrâwardî and especially of Ibn ʿArabî, which were so widely influential in the intellectual and artistic

expressions of religious life throughout the Eastern Islamic world (including the Ottoman and Mughal realms and Malay literature, as well as Shiite Iran) at least until the colonial era.

The wider pedagogical interest of these selections, beyond their obvious significance for students of Islamic philosophy, Sufism and Shiite esotericism, has to do with the way they so clearly communicate two fundamental dimensions of Islamic religious (and artistic) life that are often largely absent from introductory or survey materials on Islam: i.e., the spiritual perception of the world of nature, and the inner experience of artistic and religious symbols. That effectiveness should not really be too surprising: the profound historical influence of these metaphysics of "theophanies" for several centuries in such a wide range of Muslim religious and cultural settings already reflected the way such works were felt to express (as well as justify) the otherwise inarticulate depths of aesthetic and religious realization and creativity.

Yet at the same time the broader philosophic framework of many of these Islamic classics is so clearly spelled out that thoughtful readers can hardly avoid noticing their applicability to our interpretation (and experience) of religious and aesthetic symbolism in many other, non-Islamic contexts. The intensely personal opening essay is perhaps Corbin's most lyrical and poetic attempt to suggest those wider perspectives: with its multiple levels of allusion to Goethe and earlier German mystics, musical resonances, and phenomenological "parallels" in Jungian psychology, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and gnostic mystical traditions, it is difficult enough to follow in the original; much has inevitably been lost in translation. Behind those thought-provoking meditations, however, stands the broader historical problem suggested by the title: the complex transformation of Zoroastrian and gnostic elements (among so many others) in the gradual formation of Islamic religion and culture, a process by no means limited to the particularly striking cases (of Suhrawardî and the early Shiite hadith elaborated by the Shaykhis) that are the author's special focus here. Compared with analogous research in the areas of formative Judaism and Christianity, it is remarkable how relatively little Iranian studies have advanced, in this particular area, in the almost four decades since this Eranos lecture was originally delivered.

As for the ongoing relevance of these so insistently other-worldly Islamic philosophers and mystics, ironically enough, the arguments advanced in this volume have recently been echoed by an undoubtedly "authoritative" Shiite source: Khomeini's famous letter to Gorbachev

recommending the study of these very same subjects and authors (Suhrâwardî, Ibn ʿArabî and Mullâ Sadrâ). Were anyone to heed that advice, they could well begin with these translations.

Stephen Hirtenstein: The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabi✕.
Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 1999; pp. 289.

The Spanish mystic and philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240) was arguably the most influential Islamic thinker of the last millenium, while more recently his ideas on spirituality and the transcendent unity of religions have been widely adapted by leading contemporary authorities on comparative religion. Hirtenstein’s new book is the first study of his life (and popular introduction to his teachings) designed directly for the English-speaking audience: the result is an absorbing, impressively comprehensive overview which is accessible to the first-time reader while offering new rewards for those already familiar with his work.

Based on years of study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s works and travel to most of the places where he lived and taught, this is certainly the best general introduction to his fascinating life and teachings for readers just discovering him. The author has alternated biographical and historical chapters with sections introducing key aspects of Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought. This primarily biographical (and often dramatically *autobiographical*) focus often throws new light on the decisive interplay of history, spiritual experience, and literary expression in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writing. The author’s artful use of dozens of photos of mosques, shrines and historical sites directly connected with Ibn ‘Arabi’s journeys throughout the Islamic world also provides an invaluable accompaniment to the extensive translations from his writings, helping to bring alive the constant upheavals that marked the Shaykh’s life and eventually spread his teachings from Andalusia to the Eastern world of Rumi, Suhrawardi and other great saints, poets and statesmen of his time. Finally, the careful discussion of Ibn ‘Arabi’s autobiographical accounts of his spiritual illuminations helps bring out the inspired—and often highly controversial—personal dimension of his self-conception and mission in a way which has often been lost in more abstract accounts of his metaphysical teachings.

Claude Addas. Ibn Arabî et le voyage sans retour. Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1996. 140 pages.

Claude Addas' latest book on Ibn 'Arabi is something considerably more ambitious than an abridged and more accessible version of her definitive bio-bibliographical study [Ibn 'Arabi, ou la quête du soufre rouge. Paris, 1989; also available in English translation, Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993.]. It is really the first serious attempt in modern Western languages at a comprehensive, but popular introduction to the life, works and central teachings of this great mystical thinker. The need for such a broad introductory study accessible to college students and others approaching Ibn 'Arabi for the first time has long been evident, and all serious students of the Shaykh al-Akbar will appreciate the many daunting difficulties which the author has confronted in composing this dense and complex volume.

To begin with, this study might well be subtitled “The Seal of (Muhammadan) Sainthood”: while carefully sketching out the eventful historical background of Ibn 'Arabi's life and travels from Andalusia to Anatolia and the eastern borders of the Arab world, the author has focused throughout on those dramatic experiences and visions most central to the mystic's distinctive conception of his own universal and very specific mission, for the most part using the Shaykh's own descriptions. The result of that approach is not only a remarkably sober “spiritual autobiography”—without the familiar tendencies of hagiographic writing one encounters in almost any tradition—but also a detailed exposition of the key “Akbarian” teachings expressed, for the most part, within the framework of those same key autobiographical passages. Thus the reader encounters Ibn 'Arabi's central theme of pure “servanthood” through its concrete expressions in his own lifestyle (avoidance of possessions, etc.); his distinctive understanding of “sainthood” through the fascinating stories of his early Andalusian companions and spiritual teachers; or his conception of the world of Imagination through his own transforming initiation into that realm. Even the fascinating subject of the Shaykh's mysteriously wide-ranging historical influences is introduced, at the conclusion, through the very different personalities and approaches of his own immediate disciples and students.

The pedagogical and aesthetic attractiveness of this personalized, autobiographical approach is especially evident in contrast with the only two chapters (out of 12) where the author sets aside this broader biographical framework and instead provides a straightforward doctrinal exposition—still expressed almost entirely in Ibn 'Arabi's own words—of his characteristic

teachings concerning the “Unicity of Being,” the divine Essence and Names, and the process of divine self-manifestation. While these chapters are masterful summaries of incredibly complex theological and metaphysical concepts, the very requirements of concision and condensation produce a kind of dense philosophical exposition—inevitably very close to centuries of earlier classical Islamic commentaries—which will be intellectually challenging for most uninitiated readers.

An additional virtue of this volume, which clearly sets it apart from the earlier biographical or survey chapters by Corbin, Asin, Nasr, Austin and many others which have had to serve this introductory purpose in the past, is the author’s consistent attempt to draw her readers’ attention to those distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writing—especially his diverse *styles* (including the special role of his poetry), his inventive language, and his constant reliance on Qur’an and hadith both in his inspiration and his rhetorical expression--which are such a powerful dimension of his writings’ impact and lasting influence. Although these fundamental aspects of Ibn ‘Arabi’s work cannot readily be conveyed in summary form, the author has rightfully and repeatedly emphasized their importance in a way which should help novice readers to better appreciate those dimensions of his writing when they go on to explore the growing body of translations of his major works.

In short, there can be no question as to the comprehensive scope and scholarly reliability of this work: the author has included all the major themes of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writing, for the most part expressed in his own words, and has placed them carefully in the context of his major writings and both their immediate and their wider historical settings. There is everything an “outsider” would need by way of orientation for undertaking the study of reliable translations. One can only hope that the burgeoning interest in Ibn ‘Arabi and the rapid proliferation of translations of his major works will eventually call forth, in contemporary idiom, the sort of popular, creative transfigurations of his insights that are to be found, as Addas points out, in so many later Persian (and other Islamicate) poets. But even those readers aesthetically drawn to more poetic, personal, and creative re-interpretations of the Shaykh’s writings are likely to find Dr. Addas’s books essential reference works for decades to come.

Claude Addas. *Ibn 'Arabi, ou la quête du soufre rouge*. Paris, Gallimard, 1989. 391 pp.

The lifetime of Ibn ʿArabī (560/1165-638/1240) spans one of the most fascinating periods of Islamic history: an age when the political shrinking of the *Dār al-Islām* (through the Reconquista, Crusades and Mongol invasions) paradoxically coincided with the remarkable creative flourishing of a constellation of saints and mystical writers (Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Attar, Rumi, the two Suhrawardis, Abu Madyan and Najm al-Din Kubra and their disciples) who were to have an extraordinary historical, intellectual and spiritual influence on a much wider Islamic world for centuries to come. So it is all the more ironic that this multi-faceted figure, whose voluminous writings, teachings and disciples brought together and transmitted so many of those influences throughout later Sufism, earning him the honorific title of the "greatest master" (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), is still best known in the English-speaking world, at least, simply as a "mystical philosopher". The present study is not only the first substantial biography of this extraordinary figure: it is also a superb (and remarkably concise) introduction to his thought and spiritual teaching (in its practical and scriptural, as well as its metaphysical dimensions), to its wider Islamic intellectual context, and to the social history of the nascent "Sufi" movements in the many different regions where Ibn ʿArabī traveled and taught.

Paradoxically enough, Dr. Addas is able to do justice to all these wider, outward dimensions of Ibn ʿArabī's historical significance, while at the same time rooting her account in the bountiful autobiographical (and often vividly visionary) evidence scattered throughout his own writings, precisely by taking seriously his own self-image of his special mission as the "Seal of the Muhammadan saints" (*khatm al-awliyā'*). The thread of her narrative follows Ibn ʿArabī's own gradual discovery of this unique spiritual vocation, as it began with his first youthful inspirations, unfolded through his initiatic encounters with many masters, companions and members of the hierarchy of saints in the Maghreb (some of them familiar to readers of his Sufis of Andalusia), and was confirmed in a series of decisive visions (in Fes and Mecca) near the midpoint of his life; and it concludes with the prodigious literary output, teaching, and constant travel through which he sought to fulfill that mission. Without lapsing into hagiography--and indeed with a healthy scepticism about the anecdotes provided by later hagiographers (and

enemies)--the author thereby succeeds in portraying a coherent, convincing portrayal of aspects of the Shaykh's many-sided life and work that most earlier studies have (for understandable reasons) tended to present in isolation: 1) the visions and inspirations which are the avowed source of all his teachings; 2) his constant insistence on the central role of the Koran and hadith (and on spiritual practice explicitly rooted in them) as the essential keys to Islamic spirituality; 3) his own characteristic metaphysical formulations and explanations of those teachings (best known through the *Fusus al-Hikam*); and 4) the full range of historical activity and influence (revealed here through a painstaking study of his later travels, disciples and relations with various rulers and other religious scholars, as well as his actual writings).

However, for all the author's efforts at placing Ibn ʿArabî in his own historical context, most readers' lasting impressions are likely to be not so much of a "life", of a particular individual's outward story, as of the wider lessons and teachings he sought to convey. The apparent contradiction between the visionary mystic or poet revealed in so many of Ibn ʿArabî's own writings and the far more systematic teacher and thinker portrayed by later interpreters becomes less paradoxical when one begins to recognize how each apparently random "vision" or anecdote is almost always intended to convey certain spiritual lessons--teachings which do become increasingly coherent as one becomes familiar with the vision informing them. Dr. Addas' own portrait, based as it is on an almost unparalleled familiarity with Ibn ʿArabî's edited and unedited works, faithfully conveys her subject's own sense of his life as an ongoing, predestined spiritual mission. And her discussions of later Islamic sources, including both the Shaykh's disciples and defenders and his equally vociferous detractors, are especially revealing in pointing to some of the more universal and less immediately visible (non-literary) dimensions of that influence, whether it be through the initiatic chains of the *khirqa akbariyya* or through his constant insistence on the spiritual dimensions of the Qur'an and hadith as fundamental to the practice and message of Islam--an insistence that has made him an emblematic figure in recurrent conflicts of authority and interpretation in the Islamic world down to our own day, even among parties with little real knowledge of his works.

Virtually all modern treatments of Ibn ʿArabî's life have relied on Asin-Palacios' pioneering efforts, based primarily on the *Futuhat* and the accounts of his earlier Andalusian companions in the *Ruh al-Quds* and *Durrat al-Fakhira*. Dr. Addas' extensive researches are

based on a wealth of additional material, including the autobiographical passages in many of the Shaykh's other works (including many still unedited treatises); the sama' certificates in manuscripts of his writings (building on the bibliographic work of O. Yahya); the oral tradition of teachings later recorded by his disciples (Ibn Sawdakīn and Badr al-Habashī, as well as the better-known Eastern tradition represented by Qunawi and Awhad al-Din al-Kirmani) and their students; recently edited lives of saints and related Sufi documents from the same period; and the widely scattered *tabaqat* references to disciples, teachers and other figures mentioned by Ibn ʿArabī. Unlike many earlier studies, Dr. Addas' treatment reflects a constant sensitivity to the local situations and social contexts in question. One particularly important example is the way contemporary sources indicate Ibn ʿArabī's apparently widespread acceptance and esteem among the 'ulama' and jurists of Damascus during his own lifetime--thereby underlining the apocryphal character of many of the anecdotes supplied by later hagiographers and critics alike, and pointing to the still largely unexplored symbolic role of Ibn ʿArabī (along with al-Ghazali) in the widely scattered later disputes between various Sufi groups and their influential critics.

The more detailed results of the author's research, which should prove invaluable for subsequent students of his writings and their posterity, are summarized in a number of tables given as an appendix, including a detailed chronology of his works (often updating Yahya's *Répertoire générale*) and their autobiographical references, Ibn ʿArabī's own *silasila*'s and those of the later *khirqā akbariya*, and a biographical index of his own teachers (in all the traditional Islamic disciplines) and literary acquaintances. The extensive bibliography will be useful to both specialists and general readers (e.g., for its citation of many lesser-known modern translations from the *Futuhat*).

An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book and the Law. By Michel Chodkiewicz (tr. D. Streight), SUNY Press, Albany, NY, 1993, 184 pp.

In most areas of scholarship there are one or two books so uniquely rich in their depth of insight, breadth of understanding, and richness of expression and illustration that even their individual footnotes become, as it were, the seeds of whole volumes of research in later generations. This deceptively short volume, which so ably condenses the fruits of decades of intensive study and reflection on Ibn 'Arabî (as well as his disciples and heirs throughout the Islamic world) is clearly just such a landmark in "Akbarî" studies. Its basic unifying theme--familiar enough to even the novice reader of Ibn 'Arabî today--is the Qur'anic (and Prophetic) inspiration and aims of all the Shaykh's writing. But here Professor Chodkiewicz, referring primarily to the "ocean" of al-Futûhât al-Makkîya as well as a host of other untranslated (and often unedited) texts and commentaries, has systematically developed that theme to a depth that goes far beyond academic philology and amply illustrates the profoundly transforming power of Ibn 'Arabî's own "spiritual hermeneutics" of Islamic scripture. For those interested in the Shaykh's own life, this volume also highlights some of the deeper roots of his own extraordinary personal claims with regard to his "realization" of the Qur'an and the inner dimension of prophecy, themes which are examined in more detail in two other recently translated studies, The Seal of the Saints (by the same author) and Claude Addas' biography, The Quest for the Red Sulphur.

There is no question, then, that this is in many respects an "advanced" work, almost an *agenda* (as well as an indispensable reference work) for future study: indeed very few modern scholars could honestly lay claim to the familiar mastery of Arabic, of the Qur'an and hadith, and of so many different writings of the Shaykh and his disciples which this book often presupposes. On the other hand, serious students of Ibn 'Arabî will recognize many familiar themes from the works that are available in translation, and--while acknowledging how much of this "ocean" still remains uncharted--will surely be challenged to re-read and re-explore those available texts from new perspectives. The author's Introduction (pp. 1-18) is an especially striking illustration of that process. At first reading, the Introduction may seem like nothing more than history: a highly condensed survey of the far-reaching "manifestations" of Ibn 'Arabî's work for centuries throughout the Islamic world, focusing especially on the recent research by the author (as well as

his many colleagues and students from France and the Arab world) that has helped to bring out the actual social bases (tariqas, ethical manuals, etc.) for the popular spread of Ibn 'Arabî's insights, especially in the Ottoman period, far beyond the line of his avowed disciples and commentators. By the time one has completed reading the book, however, it will be quite evident just how and to what extent those same historical data are also meant to illuminate the nature and seriousness of the Shaykh's meta-historical claims concerning the "Seal of the saints" and his special inner relationship with both the Qur'an and the "Reality of Muhammad."

Each of the book's five chapters richly illustrates, at progressively deeper levels of expression and meaning, the full Qur'anic inspiration of all of Ibn 'Arabi's works. Not surprisingly, the first two chapters highlight themes and typical methods of scriptural interpretation--such as Ibn 'Arabî's consistent focus on the "letter" of revelation even in his apparently most original (or outrageous) insights; his stress on the ongoing, "perpetual descent" of the inner meanings of the Qur'an within each purified heart; or the metaphysical "universality" of the Qur'an and the Source of all prophecy--which should be familiar to most students of the Fusûs al-Hikam and other widely available works. The second chapter also includes a very clear and accessible summary of Prof. Chodkiewicz' seminal research on two major topics in the Shaykh's teaching: his discussion of the various types and ranks and functions of the "friends of God" (from chapter 73 of the Futûhât), and his uniquely irenic understanding of the principles of *fiqh*, with its compelling practical and intellectual relevance to the contemporary Islamic world.

The following two chapters, though, explore territory which has until now remained largely uncharted, at least in Western scholarship. Chapter 3 demonstrates in rigorous and convincing detail--focusing on the long *Fasl al-Manâzil* in the Futûhât--the multitude of precise ways in which the order, inner structures, and language and style of the Qur'an underlies the corresponding arrangement and meaning of all the Meccan Illuminations, including literally thousands of passages or allusions that would have remained mysterious and indecipherable without these essential "keys." Chapter 4 extends the same approach to revealing both the internal structure of other major works (such as the early K. al-Isrâ', the K. al-'Abâdila, the K. al-Tajalliyât), and, even more significantly, to suggesting the "networks" or "constellations" of Qur'anic allusion that form fundamental linkages--of both inspiration and cross-referential explanation--between chapters or sections of the Qur'an, the Futûhât, and each of Ibn 'Arabî's shorter works. While scholars and students of these untranslated (and often unedited) works

may have intuitively felt, and even occasionally deciphered, some of these inner connections and allusions, the systematic results of Professor Chodkiewicz' methods and examples here (summarized in 35 pages of dense notes) are rich enough to orient the research of several generations of future scholars. Indeed anyone who has wrestled directly with the constantly recurrent mysteries and opaque passages to be found throughout the Shaykh's writings may well consider these two chapters to constitute a sort of "Rosetta Stone" in the gradual deciphering of Ibn 'Arabî's work.

The final chapter, focusing on the integral relationship between religious *practice* and spiritual realization in all the Shaykh's writings, returns to a topic and illustrations (from the Fusûs al-Hikam and other translated works) familiar to a wider audience. Again the detailed analyses and synopses here--of the interplay between right actions and the attainment of *karamât* in the Mawâqî' al-Nujûm; of the roles of God and the individual soul in prayer in the Tanazzulât Mawsilîya; or of the constant allusions to the inner dimensions of *salât* throughout Tirmidhî's famous "spiritual questionnaire" in chapter 73 of the Futûhât--fully demonstrate both the author's mastery of the entire "Akbarî" corpus and the spiritual richness of these many texts that still await translation in order to reach the wider audience they deserve today.

Any brief account of Prof. Chodkiewicz' book, with its massive illustration of the impact of the Qur'an and (selective) hadith on every dimension of Ibn 'Arabî's writing, almost inevitably suggests a sort of "apologetic" or narrowly sectarian approach and an intention--on the part of either the Shaykh or his modern interpreter--that is in fact almost diametrically opposed to the actual state of affairs. Readers familiar only with the many modern Western studies emphasizing the "universality" of the Shaykh's outlook, in particular, might find this approach somewhat surprising. But this apparent paradox is no mystery to students familiar with Ibn 'Arabî's own writings: as they know from their own experience, it is easily resolvable once one begins to appreciate the "Reality" (to use the Shaykh's own expression) to which Ibn 'Arabî is actually referring. And few secondary studies in this field bring the reader closer to that constantly revelatory, more than intellectual, *experience* of the Qur'an than this remarkable work. It is itself an extraordinary illustration of that "ascension *into* meaning" (*mi'râj al-kalima*, to borrow S. al-Hakîm's apt expression) which so uniquely typifies Ibn 'Arabî's own style and approach to revelation.

The English translation, which includes a substantial index of Qur'anic verses and technical terms (but not, unfortunately, of hadith references), is quite readable on the whole, an especially commendable achievement given that so much of the original French text already consists of translations of Ibn 'Arabî's notoriously difficult language and close study of Arabic linguistic, religious and grammatical expressions.

Le Sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabī, by MICHEL

CHODKIEWICZ, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, 223 pp. + index.

For students of Ibn 'Arabi and his place in Sufism and Islamic thought more generally, this pioneering study is likely to become a classic reference comparable to T. Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism*, since it represents a radically different but ultimately complementary and indispensable approach to our understanding of the "Shaykh al-Akbar" and many essential (if far too frequently neglected) aspects of his work. However the broader interest and significance of this book--whose title seems deceptively modest until the author begins to reveal the full implications of Ibn 'Arabi's self-conception as "Seal of the (Muhammadan) saints"--is not limited to that particular field. The density and richness of the author's textual and historical materials and references, together with the scope and diversity of the methods and perspectives he brings to bear on this subject, are such that this study should likewise constitute thought-provoking reading for students of Islamic law, theology, history, comparative religion, and all the other fields where Ibn 'Arabi's comprehensive (and often controversial) vision continues to call into question many of the accepted categories through which we ordinarily tend to perceive both the traditional sciences of the Islamic world and cognate phenomena in our own lives. (One typical illustration of this wider relevance, discussed at some length in the introduction, is the way Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of "sainthood" tends to undermine--or transcend--the distinctions between "popular" and "learned" religious tradition frequently taken for granted by classical Muslim critics of Sufism, such as Ibn Taymiya, as well as by more modern observers.)

Most obviously, though, the essential historical contribution of this study is the way it systematically and rigorously re-establishes Ibn 'Arabi (i.e., his work, method and spiritual intentions) in his original Islamic (and practical Sufi) context, above all through hundreds of detailed references to his vast and still largely unstudied *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*. In fact, not only most available Western studies but also the vast majority of subsequent references to the Shaykh even in Islamic and Sufi literature (and on both sides of the still vehement controversies surrounding him) are based almost exclusively on the *Fusus al-Hikam*, focusing primarily on his more universal metaphysical insights (or on certain of its "scandalous" expressions taken out of context), and inevitably tend to suggest that the "Islamic" elements in his work are at best the

symbolic expression of a more personal, idiosyncratic philosophic doctrine (whether that may be viewed positively or negatively). Yet whatever the causes and merits of that approach (and the literature reflecting it), even a cursory survey of the *Futuhāt* will quickly reveal to what extent the available studies and critiques--again both in Islamic and Western languages--have so far failed to convey Ibn 'Arabi's personal situation and manifold contributions in terms of practical Sufism (both method and experience), the central place of the Koran in his thought, his profound mastery of virtually all the traditional religious sciences of his day (*kalam*, *fiqh*, hadith, grammar, etc.), and above all the distinctive method and perspective (radically "sunni" in its presuppositions, as Mr. Chodkiewicz stresses) governing his spiritual and intellectual integration of all of those diverse traditional elements.

Here those fundamental aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought and work are amply illustrated in relation to his understanding of *walāya* (at once "closeness" to God and the spiritual "authority" or influence flowing from it)--a notion so fundamental to Sufism that, as the author acknowledges at the very beginning, its implications touch on virtually all the more familiar metaphysical themes of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching. Beginning with an illuminating survey of earlier Sufi allusions to this subject (especially with al-Tirmidhi and Ruzbehan Baqli), each chapter focuses on an essential conceptual facet of this reality as it is developed throughout the Shaykh's writings: *wirātha*, or the distinctive spiritual "heritage" of each of the prophets; *niyāba*, the "substitution" of each *wali* as manifestation (and fulfilment) of an intrinsic aspect of the universal "Muhammadan Reality"; and *qurba*, or the actual realization of his inner proximity to the divine. This core exposition skillfully clarifies a number of disputed (or more often simply misunderstood) problems in Ibn 'Arabi and other Sufi authors--questions such as the nature of the "Muhammadan Reality", the various types of "prophecy" (both *nubuwwa* and the 'scriptural' *risāla*), the relations of different members of the spiritual hierarchy (*Qutb*, Imams, *Awtād*, etc.), the special role for Ibn 'Arabī of the "solitary ones" (*afrād*) and the "*malāmiyya*", or the relation of the "Seals" of universal and Muhammadan sainthood—all while clearly showing their inner coherence and role in the larger context of Ibn 'Arabi's thought.

But the deeper value and extraordinary richness of the author's approach has to do with the additional materials and perspectives that are brought in, at virtually every point, in order to illustrate and explain the broader context (at once historical, personal, and metaphysical) of Ibn 'Arabi's conception of *walāya*, as well as its subsequent fate (creative adaptation, rejection, and

acceptance) among later Muslims, including both Sufis and their critics. Thus the explicitly "doctrinal" subject of each chapter is constantly supplemented by extensive documentation (or appropriate allusions) concerning (1) the scriptural sources of Ibn 'Arabi's understanding and expressions in the Koran and relevant hadith, illustrating his characteristic methods and criteria in using those materials; (2) the historical development of each question in earlier Sufism (or other relevant sciences, such as kalam); (3) related metaphysical themes or principles in Ibn 'Arabi's work; (4) subsequent controversies and criticisms (particularly by Ibn Taymiya); (5) the revealing autobiographical and experiential illustrations of these questions throughout Ibn 'Arabi's writings. The breadth of reading (especially in the *Futuhat*) and reflection evident in these supplementary "notes"--many of them containing the seeds of a monograph or even a whole book--will not escape specialists in the relevant fields; certainly they should ensure the future role of this work as an indispensable reference and starting point for students able to investigate these and related issues and the perspectives at greater length in the *Futuhat* and related Sufi writings.

Finally, if we have emphasized the original historical and scholarly contributions of this book, as the features most likely to interest readers of this journal, we must add that those critical qualities are combined throughout with a rare (if soberly expressed) sensitivity to the "*ma'nā*", the inner meaning and spiritual intentions of Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of this subject, and to its practical presuppositions. That deeper dimension--without which Ibn 'Arabi's thought would be reduced to mere kalām--is brought out most explicitly in the concluding chapter: a revealing synthesis (with extensive translations and commentary from the *R. al-Anwar*, the *K. al-Isra'*, and two autobiographical chapters of the *Futuhat*) of the Shaykh's accounts of his own *mi'raj*, the "twofold path" of spiritual ascension and return, which should offer even the most sceptical reader a more vivid sense of the realities underlying the technical discussions of the preceding chapters. In the end, Mr. Chodkiewicz' careful and rigorous insistence on the full historical context and original religious intentions of Ibn 'Arabi's work does not necessarily contradict the many authors who have emphasized the "universality" of the Shaykh's teachings, but it does bring out more openly the partial and essentially interpretive nature of their remarks, while at the same time suggesting the many crucial facets of his own work (and the larger Islamic traditions in which it is rooted) that still remain to be explored.