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## . Pt. 1, Ibn 'Arabī's audiences and intentions

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Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4223>

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Published in *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society*, vol. 33, pp. 54-98, 2003

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# Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and "Translating" the *Meccan Illuminations*

*James Morris*

... Thus there is nothing in the world but Translator,  
if it is translated from divine new-Speaking.<sup>1</sup>  
So understand that!

## Part I

### Ibn 'Arabī's Audiences and Intentions

As the necessarily collective, decades-long task of the gradual integral translation of Ibn 'Arabī's *Meccan Illuminations* (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*) begins to take shape, there is an obviously growing need for providing the most basic practical tools - beginning with indispensable preparations, orientations and cautions - which are specifically required for a fruitful reading

1. From chapter 366, IV 333.11; much of the surrounding central section of chapter 366 is translated in full in *Ibn 'Arabī: The Meccan Revelations* (NY, Pir Publications, 2002), section entitled "At the End of Time".

*Ḥadīth ilāhī*: translating more freely, we could also read "from divine Communication". *Ḥadīth* here, as whenever Ibn 'Arabī is referring to the creative *divine* "Speech" (*kalām* = the corresponding dominant metaphor of the world as divine "*music*" in Rumi, Hafez and other later Sufi poetic traditions), conveys an additional emphasis on the constantly "newly emerging" (i.e., eternally re-newed, at every instant) nature of the Reality in question - as well as an even more important triadic relation between the Speaker, what is expressed (i.e., the divine Knowledge), and the receptor (the fully human being, *insān*, and all of creation). Without resorting to neologisms, "communication" may come closest to conveying all these different dimensions in everyday English.

of that unique and truly monumental work.<sup>2</sup> Those specialised scholars and translators, primarily working in English and French, who have been actively involved over the past two decades in the pioneering exploratory studies of this extraordinary work are all particularly aware of the tremendous obstacles facing any attempt at the integral translation of its longer chapters.<sup>3</sup>

2. People have often remarked on the mysterious lack of any extensive commentary tradition on this work in its entirety, as is so richly available for Ibn 'Arabī's much shorter *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusūs al-Hikam*). Some of the many reasons for that lack should be much clearer by the end of this essay.

3. In particular, readers may refer to W. Chittick's helpful and just remarks alluding to many of those obstacles in the introductory sections of his *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1989) [=SPK] and *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn 'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1998) [=SDG]. This essay is intended to clarify and to make more explicit, for those who are not scholarly specialists in this field, many of the wide-ranging considerations only briefly alluded to or assumed in Prof. Chittick's summary remarks.

Western scholars have been exploring and mining the *Futūḥāt* for various purposes since the first partial translations (including some very short chapters) by figures like M. Asin-Palacios and M. Vâlsan earlier in the past century. To the best of our knowledge, though, the only complete and relatively reliable translation of an entire, representatively longer chapter of that work yet available is M. Gloton's *Traité d'Amour* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1986), a 320-page version of the famous chapter 1 78 (= only 41 Arabic pages, vol. II, pp. 320-361), a text which had already been carefully studied by both Asin and Henry Corbin. (For entirely unexplained reasons, the translator of this pioneering French version nowhere indicates that this is actually a chapter from the *Futūḥāt*, and only at the very end (p. 263) quotes Ibn Arabī as indicating that it is from chapter [actually, the *juz*] "115"!.) Unsurprisingly, the translator's many unacknowledged personal editorial additions required for this transformation of a single chapter into a self-sufficient "book" tend to obscure or even entirely eliminate some of the most distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabī's own characteristic rhetoric, assumptions, and demands on his readers which are discussed in this essay.

Apart from Gloton's pioneering volume, the most extensive and reliable translations - i.e., with all the adequate explanatory and contextual background needed by non-specialists - of relatively complete sections from longer chapters of the *Futūḥāt*, in both English and French, are to be found in the bilingual volume *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illumi-*

Yet all the same, throughout the long process of preparing complete translations of a number of key chapters for two planned volumes on Ibn 'Arabī's eschatology and his religious, ethical and political philosophy,<sup>4</sup> we have still been repeatedly surprised by the many entirely new challenges of this enterprise. More positively, those unexpected difficulties have gradually served to bring out the many distinctive ways in which the *Futūhāt* themselves constitute *a new and unique literary form* with its own specific rhetoric: i.e., its own distinctive articulation of aims, audiences, language and structures - many of them radically different even from the more familiar rhetorical features (at least for most modern-day students of Ibn 'Arabī) of the *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusūs al-Hikam*). To take another analogy, moving from the study of Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusūs* to the actual reading of the *Futūhāt* is somewhat like the transition from reading the condensed ghazals or quatrains of Rumi, which are most familiar to popular English-language audiences today, to the serious study of his immense *Mathnawī* (*Masnavī*).<sup>5</sup> And in each of those cases, it should not be surprising - especially given everything we know

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nations: *Textes choisis/Selected Texts*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz; in the recent, revised version (with our new Introduction and bibliographic discussion) of the English translations from that volume, *Ibn 'Arabī: The Meccan Revelations* (NY, Pir Publications, 2002); and especially in William Chittick's monumental cosmological study of the *Futūhāt*, the SDC. Other volumes including longer selections from the *Futūhāt* have also appeared in recent years in Russian (by A. Knysh); German (Alma Giese's extensive volume, *Unwolke und Welt: Mystische Texte des Größten Meisters* [Munich, C. H. Beck, 2002]); and Spanish (by Victor Palleja de Bustinza).

4. Tentatively entitled *Ibn 'Arabī's Divine Comedy: Eschatology and Spiritual Realisation in the "Meccan Illuminations"*, and *Paths to the Real: Freedom, Creativity, Diversity and Tolerance in Ibn 'Arabī's Religious Philosophy*.

5. It is noteworthy that traditional students and commentators of both the *Futūhāt* and Rumi's *Mathnawī* have tended to focus on relatively scattered, atomistic readings of very small parts (even single lines) or broad, thematic perspectives. One promising exception is the far-reaching, pioneering dissertation on the deeper organising structures of chiasmus and parallelism underlying the entire *Mathnawī* (SOAS, 2003) by Dr. S. G. Safavi, to appear in expanded form in the forthcoming book he is now preparing together with Prof. Simon Weightman.

about both authors concerned - to note that the essential keys to unlocking and appreciating their intentions and structures are so often to be found in a fresh and more probing, sensitive reading and heightened appreciation of the corresponding rhetorical features of both the Qur'an and certain hadith.

The purpose of this two-part essay is to highlight some of the most practically important of those new and distinctive features of the *Meccan Illuminations*, from the perspective of readers limited to English (or other Western languages), especially those characteristics which flow from the ongoing dilemmas of translation and all the accompanying necessities of explanation and contextualisation. Since the spectrum of possibilities facing any translator of Ibn 'Arabī is so vast,<sup>6</sup> it is especially important that non-specialist readers become sufficiently familiar with the actual range of those basic possibilities that they can begin to *actively* participate, in a necessarily ongoing way, in re-translating the approximative English words they are faced with into a more adequate and nuanced form, especially in relation to their own vitally indispensable illustrations and experiences of the spiritual situations and phenomena in question.

As our epigraph indicates, the necessity of this personalised, constantly renewed process of "active translation" is in fact quite central to the characteristic rhetoric and intentions of Ibn 'Arabī's writing, already in its original Arabic forms. Indeed the challenge of working with different translators, with their necessarily varying approaches and understandings, is in itself an extremely useful and productive spiritual (and intellectual) exercise, as is already familiar to students of similarly dense and complex works such as the Bible, Qur'an, *I Ching*, or Plato's dialogues.

6. We should stress that the larger problems that are the focus of this essay are *not* primarily a matter of the relative qualifications and capacities of each translator, nor do they have to do with the obvious recurrent issue (faced by every honest translator) of simply not yet understanding certain passages of the *Futūḥāt*. In fact, the more a translator actually comes to know about Ibn 'Arabī and his cultural and historical contexts, and the more possible *audiences* one is genuinely acquainted with, the greater the range of complexities and possibilities involved in any effort of translation.

## FROM READING TO REALISATION

The ultimate aim of all of Ibn 'Arabī's writing is to support and intensify each of his reader's necessarily distinctive and uniquely personal process - at once both spiritual and intellectual - of "realisation" (to use one of Ibn 'Arabī's favourite expressions, *tahqīq*), or of evolving spiritual intelligence.<sup>7</sup> In short, the most essential elements of that process are each reader's ongoing, inherently cumulative combination of experience (in all its forms and dimensions); action (again in *all* dimensions); observable consequences; and the appropriate active reflection on the interactions between all those preceding elements. What Ibn 'Arabī's writing, particularly in the *Futūhāt*, can add for readers actually involved in the process of realisation is a mysteriously effective set of guidelines, allusions, mirrors, and spiritual "catalysts" and (to use the classical Qur'anic term) "reminders" - primarily drawn from the Qur'an, hadith, and the related reflections and inspirations<sup>8</sup> of Ibn 'Arabī and other proven spiritual teachers and interpreters of those sources - which ultimately have a potent transforming effect on all four equally essential elements of their unique personal "equation" of realisation, even if their most obvious initial impact is often at the level of more strictly intellectual reflection.<sup>9</sup>

7. See our detailed discussions of this central theme in Islamic thought in two recent volumes: *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype Press, 2004 [in press]; originally published Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2001), which illustrates this theme in regard to the key chapter 366 from the *Futūhāt*, as well as in the works of several other key Muslim thinkers. And the forthcoming *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn 'Arabī's "Meccan Illuminations"* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2004), which concretely details Ibn 'Arabī's development of this process in the *Futūhāt*, in relation to a number of fundamental spiritual topics. See also the many passages from the *Futūhāt* explicitly discussing this theme, translated in *SDG*, index under "realization", "realizers", etc.

8. Whose central importance is already broadly emphasised precisely in the spiritual "openings" or "illuminations" that provide the title of this work: see also the discussions of Ibn 'Arabī's title to be found in each of the above-mentioned recent studies of the *Futūhāt* (n.3).

While various dimensions of that wider process will be discussed in more detail below, the most obvious feature of the unique literary form and structure<sup>10</sup> of the *Meccan Illuminations* is that Ibn 'Arabī's language and arrangement of topics in that work is carefully designed like a series of "speed bumps", "detours", or mental or spiritual "hooks" designed to constantly slow down, re-route, disengage, question, and - at least ideally

9. Given the wide-ranging limitations - and scholarly and other expectations - normally connected with academic books, it should not be surprising that this is the level where most of the major existing studies of the *Futūḥāt*, as of Ibn 'Arabī more generally, are still publicly situated - even if their authors, in almost every case, visibly try to suggest the range of ways their readers can or should move beyond those limitations.

10. We say "unique" because it is quite remarkable, given the extraordinarily widespread and lasting influences of the *Futūḥāt*, even as far as China and Indonesia, that there has apparently not been any serious attempt at imitating - in Arabic prose, at least - all the distinctive rhetorical and literary structures of this work. One does find at least a pale reflection of Ibn 'Arabī's style in parts of Jīlī's famous *al-insān al-kāmil*, and the closest partial stylistic imitation that we know of is found throughout the Arabic philosophical writings of the famous later Iranian philosopher, Sadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī. We have pointed out the importance of Sadra's characteristic usage of many key rhetorical features of the *Futūḥāt* (including those described below in this essay) in *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981; paperback reprint forthcoming, Ashland, White Cloud Press/Arche-type, 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, the profound implications of this "Akbari" rhetorical style for our understanding of Sadra's thought are not extensively discussed in the traditional oral teaching of his works; they have certainly not yet been adequately reflected in published discussions of his philosophy.

The attempt to communicate Ibn 'Arabī's intentions in new, creatively adapted forms of *Persian* poetry, and a distinctive genre of mixed prose and poetry, is of course a very different matter. Devoted students of the Shaykh's thought, from 'Irāqī to Jāmī and beyond, carefully transmuted his teachings and deeper intentions into entirely new genres which helped shape and spread the Islamic humanities throughout the Eastern Islamic world, in ways we have discussed in a wide range of conference papers, lectures and translations. A number of those key historical points of transmission of Ibn Arabī's teachings, are alluded to in various sections and notes below; see especially the references cited at n.52 below.

- re-focus and eventually transform our normal habitual, conditioned mental and perceptual processes.<sup>11</sup> All of this has the immediate concrete aim of helping each serious reader to stop, look afresh, actively listen and begin to enter into a deeper, actively effective cooperation with the One ultimate teacher, guide, master, and companion.<sup>12</sup>

11. Many of those distinctive rhetorical devices are already well illustrated in Ibn Arabī's *Bezels of Wisdom*, and thus carefully discussed in the classical and recent literature devoted to that work, such as the relevant chapters of Michael Sells' *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1994). For the *Futūhāt*, in addition to the translation volumes already mentioned (n. 3), see the magisterial, far-reaching discussions included in M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabī, the Book, and the Law* (tr. D. Streight, Albany, SUNY, 1993). [For ease of access for English-only readers, references are given in this essay to English translations of this and other works, when they are available; obviously, readers should refer to the original French titles when that is possible.]

In the *Futūhāt*, however, the most distinctive *new* stylistic devices and challenges for careful readers appear on a more "horizontal" plane, having to do with Ibn Arabī's extremely complex arrangement (including the puzzle-like "scattering", etc. discussed in Part II below [forthcoming, *JMIAS*, Vol. XXXIV]) of a far more complex set of different topics, sciences, telling anecdotes, scriptural allusions, and the like both within his individual chapters and its six larger "Parts" (*fasl*), and especially throughout the book as a whole - in such a way that only a reader who has spent years studying the *whole* work can really claim with some degree of confidence to understand all the roles and meanings of its different constituent elements.

12. There is a familiar literary genre in classical Arabic literature of works intended to help provide *readers* with the guidance that would otherwise normally be provided by a specialised doctor, jurist, and so on. (In Arabic: ... *man lā yahduruhu al-faqīh, al-tabīb*, etc.) At a far more serious and all-encompassing level, one can understand the *Meccan Illuminations* as intended to stand in something like that kind of relation to the proper holistic understanding of *all three* ontological dimensions of the universal divine "Book". For example, at the level of the proper interpretation and application of the divine "wise-rulings" (*ahkām*) of Islam, in particular, Ibn Arabī quite explicitly states his bold ambitions for the self-sufficiency of this work and his comprehensive approach in a key passage of "*Explanation and Clarification*" (O.Y. V, 162-3; ch. 68) that comes near the very beginning of his lengthy discussion of the obligatory prescribed forms of worship (the *'ibādāt*) in the *Futūhāt*.



However, the first practical effect of initially encountering this unique literary form, for almost every reader, is an immediate, usually somewhat unpleasant, impression of frustration, difficulty, confusion, disorder, mixing of genres, and intentional puzzlement - possibly resulting, at one extreme, in a kind of angry resentment or boredom whose roots and significance are discussed below.<sup>13</sup> (The vaguely reminiscent analogies of that initial experience to the famous reactions of an earlier generation of readers, when faced with the unfamiliar literary experiments of Pound, Eliot or Joyce, are anything but coincidental!)

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More broadly, all of the *Futūhāt* can itself be seen as an equally comprehensive response to al-Ghazālī's famous *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* - just as chapter 73 includes his famous response to the riddling spiritual questions of al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī - in that it carefully integrates the already vast contents of that earlier Sufi work, while at the same time providing in all necessary detail the potential comprehensive spiritual and intellectual responses which al-Ghazālī, quite intentionally, normally leaves to each of his readers to work out for themselves.

13. As with the *Fusūs al-Hikam* (which generated dozens of commentaries still needed by those already intimately familiar with its languages and cultural premises), it is important for modern readers depending on translations of the *Futūhāt* to know with confidence that their initial impressions of difficulty are not just the result of their own unavoidable unfamiliarity with so many aspects of Ibn 'Arabī's culture, background, language and the like. In fact, such impressions closely mirror the intended reactions and effects of the actual Arabic text!

The earliest Muslim interpreters and teachers of Ibn Arabī's ideas, when working with non-Sufi or non-Arab audiences unfamiliar with his work, often faced many of the same basic problems of communication discussed in this essay. One particularly striking - and instructive - illustration of that process, and of the situation-specific pedagogical creativity it necessarily requires in any age, is to be found in the commentaries of Sayyid Haydar 'Amulī (b.720/1320), who devoted much of his writing to explaining and justifying the Shaykh's works to what was, in his time, the still largely hostile or highly suspicious group of learned Imami-Shia religious scholars. See especially the fascinating set of his 28 different mandala-like illustrative diagrams included in the edition (by H. Corbin and O. Yahia) of the already lengthy (almost 600 pages in Arabic) *Introduction* to his immense commentary on the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, *Le Textes des Textes (nass al-nusūs), les prolégomènes* (Tehran/Paris, l'Institut franco-iranienne, 1975).

While the deeper effects, rhythms and intentions of the unique literary form of these spiritual "Openings" (*Futūhāt*) can only become evident through a great deal of patient and active interaction with Ibn 'Arabī's text, the immediate, unavoidable effect of that encounter - in its own time and over the centuries, as much as for today's "foreign" readers - is to confront head-on most readers' natural expectations and habits of reading (at least of expository prose) as consisting in the horizontal, consecutive, progressively more advanced, "quantitative" *accumulation* of a single conceptually coherent form of knowledge and insight.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it seems that Ibn 'Arabī's typical prose here - just as much as his equally distinctive and challenging poetic style - was in the most fundamental ways equally unique, unfamiliar and intentionally provocative and puzzling in his own time as it is today.<sup>15</sup> The remarkable lack of any later imitators is one very telling indicator of that fact.

Fortunately, most of the unfamiliar vertical and qualitative intentions which dictated these forms and the corresponding requirements for a fruitful reading of this work do become evident as soon as we approach it from within the indispensable wider context of realisation we have just mentioned. A few widely familiar literary-spiritual parallels which might prove helpful for some, are the ways in which people normally approach and use texts like the *I Ching*, the Psalms, or the ghazals of Hafez: in such cases, of course, most readers quickly discover

14. It is important to stress that the overall horizontal dimension of the construction of the *Futūhāt* does involve many progressive and eventually unifying larger structures, whose gradual unveiling and discovery is clearly intended to keep committed readers actively engaged in studying the work. (See, for example, the section on "scattering" in forthcoming Part II.) But fortunately, a full knowledge of those deep structures is not at all needed to use and benefit from the earlier and individual chapters, or to begin to decipher these spiritual "meanings" which are Ibn 'Arabī's primary aim.

15. The one major exception to this remark, of course, was the much deeper familiarity of most of Ibn 'Arabī's original Muslim audiences with the unique rhetoric, forms and language of Qur'an, which in itself (as we shall see below) immediately helps readers sharing that familiarity to grasp at least some of the inspirations and intentions of many of the most distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabī's writing.

how little is to be gained from quantitatively and quickly reading through a large body of such texts intended for very different purposes. In particular, once we appreciate that the aim of the *Futūhāt* is to deepen our spiritual awareness and understanding, and to develop all the wide-ranging dimensions of practical spiritual intelligence, we can better appreciate that reading and studying this work in the spirit in which it was written is not that different in essence - if not in scope and depth! - from reading any of the host of widely available "manuals" for the various familiar forms of traditional bodily-spiritual disciplines (Tai Chi, yoga, and so on). Not surprisingly, most readers should quickly discover that such written instructions are not at all the same as the actual exercises - and eventually, that even those exercises, if attempted in isolation, are not really the same as working with an experienced teacher or guide.

So it helps to approach these far more complex exercises of spiritual intelligence in at least a similarly open and committed spirit, and with a similar appreciation of the appropriate amounts of time, actual practice and ongoing dedication required for any lastingly effective results. Fortunately, at this point it may help to point out one essential saving feature of Ibn 'Arabī's writing: its distinctive "holographic" quality<sup>16</sup> means that readers can (and often should) begin to approach the *Futūhāt* precisely at those particular points which they themselves find most immediately accessible, interesting and motivating. The universal spiritual principles Ibn 'Arabī has set out to communicate - and the unique language of the Qur'an on which he always relies - are such that the practice and dawning recognition of any individual part quickly engages and reveals

16. I.e., such that the full original image is in reality contained in and can be revealed through any surviving part. This fundamental feature of the *Futūhāt* is particularly well-illustrated through the wide-ranging selection of longer translated passages, from throughout that work, which are brought together in Chittick, SDG. Readers of that volume very quickly discover that the range of subjects Ibn 'Arabī actually deals with, in virtually any of the many longer selections included there, typically goes far beyond whatever particular "cosmological" points those selections are explicitly intended to illustrate.

the much larger whole that is always involved in the Shaykh's writing and his ultimate intentions.

### PRACTICAL STUDY CONTEXTS

While the remainder of this essay concentrates on various facets of the (distinctive rhetorical and literary structures of the *Futūhāt*, it is helpful to begin with some more practical and concrete implications of the embeddedness of that work in the wider human process of realisation. In that regard, one of the most encouraging aspects of the apparently global contemporary interest in the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and other available translations of Ibn 'Arabī's writings that has developed in recent decades is the way in which people often seem to be studying his writings slowly and in small groups. Practically speaking, both of those terms - i.e., "small" and "group" - are equally essential.<sup>17</sup> Given Ibn 'Arabī's doctrinally central teaching about the uniqueness, complementarity and essential role of the infinite (and endlessly renewed) divine "Self-manifestations" irreplaceably conveyed through each creature - and most fundamentally, through each earthly human being - it is difficult to see how far anyone can normally advance in developing actual *spiritual* intelligence (i.e., beyond the strictly conceptual, mental forms of understanding) through purely solitary study and reflection on this unique text. For each student-participant immediately provides additional

17. Such informal study-groups are in many ways the present-day equivalent of the earlier, less formal, nascent Sufi institutions which gradually spread throughout many parts of the Islamic world, in the centuries following Ibn 'Arabī-through a slow process of institutionalisation of which Ibn Arabī himself, when he began to encounter such institutions after leaving the Maghreb, always remained highly suspicious. As readers can quickly test for themselves, the actual processes of spiritual learning described in his writing (and most densely in the *Futūhāt*) are indeed universal and immediately accessible all over the world, depending only on the right participants. Such groups are most effective if they are small and relatively egalitarian (i.e., enough to enable the honest, intimate sharing by all participants of the central practical elements of realisation), and are most fruitful and illuminating if they include people with a range of different personalities, backgrounds and practical roles in life.

fascinating illustrations and insights into the implications of each portion of the Shaykh's writing. Even more importantly, it is almost impossible, under any conditions, for a solitary person (or for a closed, authoritarian group) to recognise, and then begin to work with, their own most characteristic spiritual and mental blind spots and habitually conditioned qualities, such as those that help to constitute each person's distinctive public "personality" and character. Indeed, even if we do begin with reading alone, the inevitable implications of our epigraph from the *Futūhāt* - of Ibn 'Arabī's guiding vision of the *whole world* as both "translator" and ever-renewed divine "Speaking" - should quickly involve us in far wider perspectives and forms of participation in this cosmic "divine comedy".

Equally as important as group study, though, is the operative adjective "small" - and thus, we might add, necessarily informal and non-institutionalised. As indicated by Ibn 'Arabī's own countless personal anecdotes and illustrations throughout this significantly entitled collection of his own spiritual "openings", everyone's initial awakening to the relevant dimensions of spiritual life and realisation typically begins with what is "inner": with our dreams, intentions, and the vast phenomenological field of both spiritual and less elevated intuitions summed up in Ibn 'Arabī's extraordinarily elaborate and concretely appropriate phenomenological terminology. This particular book, from first to last, is only seriously accessible and lastingly interesting to what he constantly calls his true "companions" (*ashāb*) - the "people actually worthy" (*ahl*) of spiritual unveiling, finding, witnessing and divine informing, and the like. Spiritual intelligence or realisation, of course, means developing our innate human capacity to "translate" and "read" the interactions of all those theophanies or divine *Signs*, both "*in the souls*" and "*on the horizons*" (Q.41:53).<sup>18</sup> But the genuine intimacy and empathy that are so practically necessary to support that process are

18. See the summary discussion of this process in the Introduction to *Orientations*: ..., and the detailed thematic illustrations of the process of "realisation" in the *Futuhat* included in our forthcoming volume *The Reflective Heart*: ... (both titles in n.7 above).

extremely difficult to discover, much less to nurture and sustain, for most people, beyond a small group of companions.

The unfolding development and deepening of spiritual intelligence is like nothing so much as an ongoing, moment-to-moment "whole-life review", a conscious, constantly active anticipation of that post-mortem experience which is carefully described in the spiritual classics of every tradition. And obviously the most educationally effective, lastingly influential aspects of that cosmic educative process - of each soul's unending private lessons - ordinarily lie precisely in our mistakes and apparent failures, and in the more visible earthly consequences of such failures: i.e., in the initially painful revelation of our actual spiritual tests, intentions, blindnesses, insensitivities, confusions and the like. Precisely the sort of thing, Ibn 'Arabī is well aware, that none but the *malāmiyya* - those rare "People of (intentional) Blame" whom he situates near the summit of his spiritual hierarchy - would normally share with any but a small and intimate group of fellow "realisers".<sup>19</sup>

#### THE FOUR "AUDIENCES" OF THE *MECCAN ILLUMINATIONS*

Nothing is more important for understanding the distinctive literary forms and aims of the *Meccan Illuminations* than the discussion of the various essential levels of belief and knowledge which Ibn 'Arabī has himself carefully placed at the very beginning of his Introduction (*muqaddima*) to that work, along with

19. On the *malāmiyya* and related spiritual figures (such as the "solitaries", *al-afrād*) in Ibn 'Arabī, see the profound and illuminating discussions - primarily relating to the *Futūḥāt* - included in M. Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993). The importance of these themes is more accessibly dramatised through the corresponding recurrent *malāmī* figure of the *rend* in the *Divān* of Hafez. The centrality of such educational experiences in the actual process of spiritual realisation also highlights the intrinsic difficulties posed, for the fruitful study of Ibn 'Arabī, by too rigidly institutionalised or hierarchical settings, which naturally tend to create either social pressures for hypocrisy, or unhelpful illusions of safely passive learning.

a corresponding series of progressively more challenging "cre-dos" reflecting those radically different human spiritual aptitudes and conditions.<sup>20</sup> Students of Ibn 'Arabī without Arabic, who have primarily worked with his *Fusūs al-Hikam*, will already be helpfully acquainted with his basic recurring distinction - most fully developed there in his twelfth chapter on *The Wisdom of the Heart* (the Bezel of Shu'ayb) and the corresponding commentaries - between those different groups of people whose perceptions of all reality, including God, are primarily dominated and determined by their conditioned, usually unconscious "beliefs",<sup>21</sup> by their limited individual "restricting intellect",<sup>22</sup>

20. Those key sections of his Introduction are more fully translated and outlined, with more extensive explanations and notes, in "How to Study the *Futūhāt*: Ibn 'Arabī's own Advice", pp. 73-89 in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury/Rockport, Element Books, 1993); that translation and study is also included, in revised form, in our forthcoming volume *The Reflective Heart*: ... (n.7 above). As discussed below, Ibn 'Arabī's discussion there establishes basic epistemological and spiritual distinctions closely corresponding - in both form and phenomenological function - to the related images of the Sun, divided line, and cave at the centre of Plato's *Republic*.

21. Due to the unfortunately common and painfully inappropriate English mistranslation of the central Qur'anic term *īmān* ("true faith" or "inner certainty") by "belief", it is essential to explain here that the common Arabic expression for the kind of deeply rooted "belief" (*i'tiqād*) that is Ibn 'Arabī's concern - a term which, quite significantly, does not even occur in the Qur'an! - is not particularly theological and for Ibn 'Arabī does not even particularly refer to consciously articulated belief systems. Instead, as he makes quite clear in the *Fusūs*, his concern is the deeper human reality of all the hobbling, "restrictive limitations" (the root-meaning of the underlying Arabic term), blinders, unquestioned presuppositions and distorting lenses and projections - usually unconscious, for the most part - which unknowingly determine and structure our normal experience and perceptions of all reality.

22. 'Aql: here again an important caution is essential. Ibn 'Arabī - like most other Sufi writers, in Arabic and other languages - tends to use the term 'aql in three related, but also radically different senses: (a) to refer to the limited mental reasoning processes or "thinking" of the *individual human mind* - in which case he typically emphasises the limitations and shortfalls of this dimension (already highlighted by the root-meaning of that

or by inspired spiritual "knowing"<sup>23</sup> and divine "informing" (*ta'rīf*). While that most elementary three-fold epistemological distinction continues to operate throughout all of Ibn 'Arabī's writings, his pointedly significant remarks here in the Introduction to the *Futūhāt* are considerably more nuanced, and they highlight much more clearly the extraordinary complexity of the possible aims and functions of his rhetoric throughout this immense work.

Specifically, Ibn 'Arabī explicitly adds here a fourth distinct form of awareness - the immediate knowing of our experiential "states", spiritual and otherwise - which in fact has the effect of revealing the existentially fundamental operative question of *discernment*, the essential key to every form and expression of spiritual intelligence, as the central aim of these revelatory

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Arabic term); and (b) to refer occasionally (although his later philosophical commentators use *'aql* much more often in this sense) to the highest, First manifestation of the divine Knowledge - a metaphysical dimension which Ibn Arabī himself tends to discuss using a dozen or more interchangeable symbolic expressions ("Reality of Muhammad", etc.). There is also (c) a third very common sense, usually in the participial form (*'āqil*), where the expression has the more everyday Arabic, religio-legal sense of someone who is simply intelligent and old enough to be morally and religiously responsible, or more broadly, possessing practical intelligence and basic "common sense".

Now readers familiar with Ibn Arabī, Rumi and their like usually have no difficulty seeing immediately, from the context, which particular sense of *'aql* or *'āqil* is actually intended. But the difficulties this contrast poses for translators - and the confusion that it frequently generates among unsuspecting readers - are often substantial. Virtually the same is true, again in Ibn Arabī and more widely, with the Arabic word *nafs* (usually translated as "soul" or "self") - which, depending on the context, can be referring to the highest, immortal aspects of the soul (i.e., the "spirit", *rūh*); to the lowest, human-animal drives and automaticities of the human soul; or to the Universal Soul, the second-highest level of divine Self-manifestation, after the universal "First Intellect" just mentioned.

23. *Ma'rifa*: it is important to note that the actual titles of most chapters in the *Futūhāt* are explicitly devoted to one or another of the many forms of this "inner knowing", whose Arabic root is close to the French sense of *connaître*, i.e., to immediately recognise and know intimately and directly from first-hand experience.



"Openings". Taken in isolation, of course, these abstract epistemological (and ontological distinctions) are not particularly illuminating, since it is their detailed concrete phenomenology, their actual practical significance in the real processes of spiritual life and growth, that is gradually brought to life throughout these *Futūhāt*. Within that intended phenomenological context of realisation, however, their significance as indispensable keys to Ibn 'Arabī's distinctive language and intentions here can be summarised in the following five fundamental points:

1. All four of these "levels" or forms of cognition are at least potentially - and usually actively - alive and accessible to some extent (if only potentially) in the broader experience of *each* human being.<sup>24</sup> Correspondingly, perhaps the most obvious key purpose of the *Futūhāt* is therefore to "open up" our awareness of those higher dimensions of spiritual understanding which have previously remained either unconscious or not significantly actualised.
2. There are critically important distinctions - either between what is true and false, or more commonly, between what is *real* and illusory or misunderstood - that operate *within* each level or dimension of knowing. To take only one example, at the level of "beliefs", the movement from purely unconscious and habitual conditioning to greater conscious awareness of a previously unconscious determinant belief structure is a familiar and essential basic step in virtually every spiritual path or discipline.
3. The language of "levels" used here should not delude us into imagining either that individuals are somehow exclusively localised in one particular condition, or that our relative movement to higher levels of knowing implies some kind of total abandonment of the lower forms. On the contrary, Ibn 'Arabī's

24. Some of the practical spiritual implications of this key point are discussed below, both here and in Part II. Everything in Ibn Arabī's thought - and in his distinctive understanding of Revelation - is oriented towards awakening his readers to a deeper, more holistic awareness of the dynamic nature of existence and the universality of the process of realisation, which alone can explain the central role of the realised human being (*insān*) in his world-view.

writing throughout the *Futūhāt* is carefully designed to raise his readers toward an all-encompassing vision<sup>25</sup> of the whole of the divine action and purpose in the vast crucible of human transformation, throughout all time and all levels of manifestation. This holistic vision depends decisively on an intimate awareness of the indispensable concrete spiritual roles of *every* level of spiritual realisation.<sup>26</sup>

4. Ibn 'Arabī constantly reminds his readers - with an intensity and richness that increases in direct proportion to their own level of increasing spiritual awareness and intelligence - that true communication and right action in this world depend decisively on the most deeply accurate and empathic awareness of the actual potential for realisation within *each* of those persons with whom we are communicating and interacting.<sup>27</sup>

5. Once Ibn 'Arabī's reader has become fully conscious of these four broad levels of awareness and realisation, it becomes relatively easy to see the ways in which each chapter of his work constantly shifts, usually with an intentionally shocking abruptness, between radically different rhetorical forms: for example (to list only a few), metaphysical poems; pointed "allusions" (*ishārāt*) or problematic analyses of passages from the Qur'an or hadith; direct anecdotal recounting of his own or others'

25. Always, of course, in the distinctive form of a uniquely revealing "super-commentary" on the divine Book in all its senses: see the following section, on "the universal Book" - as well as, in greater detail, W. Chittick's entire Introduction to his *SDG*, which is in fact presented essentially in the form of an ongoing commentary developing this single central image.

26. See in particular his key concluding words to his Introduction to the *Futūhāt*, quoted at the end of this section. Those who have seriously studied Dante's entire *Divine Comedy* (not just the *Inferno*) will immediately recognise the remarkably parallel vision and deeper intentions of these two masters - a profound parallelism (quite independent of any historical influences) which becomes particularly obvious when we closely examine the eschatological sections and teachings of these *Meccan Illuminations*.

27. Ibn 'Arabī's endlessly rich practical lessons in this area are highlighted above all in his carefully specific, concrete use of hadith and stories of the Prophet, supplemented by vivid autobiographical descriptions of his own spiritual experiences and those of his companions, contemporary Sufis, and earlier prophets and "Friends of God".

revealing spiritual experiences; references to (or partial elaborations of) dozens of rational and traditional sciences of his day; related stories of familiar historical and religious figures; and so on. In almost every case, the particular literary form in question can potentially be grasped and received - given the actual momentary receptivity of each particular reader - initially at *any* of the four basic levels: i.e., as belief, concept, experientially palpable symbol/allusion (Qur'anic "*Sign*"), and actual reality. But likewise, in each case Ibn 'Arabī typically adds a distinctive unexpected "spin" or peculiar rhetorical device designed to subtly (or obviously!) confuse, disorient, or "short-circuit" each reader's normal, habitual, unconscious way of receiving that particular lesson - thus potentially clearing the way for (or at the very least, reminding us of) that condition of inner openness, wonder and "bewilderment" (*hayra*) necessary for any new spiritual "opening" or deeper realisation.<sup>28</sup>

The possible effects of those distinctive rhetorical devices, and the receptive states of spiritually transforming bewilderment they intentionally engender, are meant to confront Ibn 'Arabī's readers, at almost each step, with three simultaneous possibilities: to let go and be carried to or reminded of a higher, more adequate spiritual level of realisation intended by that remark; to try to work out (whether with one's intellect or one's available beliefs) a satisfactorily "reasonable" solution to the bewildering problem in question; or to abandon further reading, for the time being, in response to the typical corresponding reactions of boredom, frustration and irritation already mentioned. Practised readers of the *Meccan Illuminations* will notice that one dramatic result of this distinctive rhetoric - if it is combined, as intended, with the reader's own ongoing process of practical realisation - is that the same "familiar" passages of this work will

28. In this regard, Ibn 'Arabī's playfully meaningful and intentionally puzzling writing in the *Futūhāt*, in particular, is often strongly reminiscent of many of the stories of Borges, as well as much now widely familiar Sufi, Zen, and similar spiritual literature. These literary devices, many already familiar from the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, include forms of paradox, etymological reminders, puzzles, problematic allusions, and so on - some of them discussed in more detail below.

typically take on an entirely different meaning and coloration at each renewed reading. And another, even more dramatically memorable, common effect of these "Openings" is that appropriately attentive readers, actively engaged in the process of realisation, will often find to their surprise that the apparently extraordinary spiritual phenomena so richly described in certain passages almost simultaneously actually occur, as if by magic, "for real" and quite concretely in the context of their own lives. By way of illustrating the fundamental levels and forms of awareness we have just summarised, it is helpful to quote the corresponding opening section of Ibn 'Arabī's own "Introduction" (*muqaddima*) to his *Meccan Illuminations* - keeping in mind that the normal human base-level of conditioned, mostly unconscious "beliefs", since it is not a form of actual *cognition*, is not directly discussed at this initial stage.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

We said: From time to time it occurred to me that I should place at the very beginning of this book a chapter concerning (theological) creeds,<sup>29</sup> supported by definitive arguments and salient proofs. But then I realised that that would only distract the per-son who is properly prepared and seeking an increase (in spiritual knowing), who is receptive to the fragrant breaths of divine Bounty through the secrets of being and spiritual "finding" (*wujūd*). For if the properly prepared person persists in remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and spiritual retreat, if they empty the place (of their heart) of all mental chatter, and sit at the doorstep of their Lord like a poor beggar who has nothing - then God will bestow upon them and give them some of that knowledge of Him, of those divine secrets and supernal understandings which He granted to His

29. Or "statements of belief": *'aqā'id* (sing, *'aqīda*) normally refers to the formal doctrinal tenets that had been promulgated by the various schools of Islamic theology (*kalām*), primarily the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites - whose theological formulations Ibn 'Arabī, like many other Sufis, tended to prefer over the restrictively this-worldly "rationalism" of the Mu'tazilites. This is the same term that he applies to the three longer "creeds" that he eventually included in his Introduction (see below).

servant al-Khadir.<sup>30</sup> ... So the person with focused spiritual intention, during their retreat with God, may realise through Him – how exalted are His gifts and how prodigious His grace! – (forms of spiritual) knowledge that are concealed from every theologian on the face of the earth, and indeed from anyone relying on purely intellectual inquiry and proofs who lacks that spiritual state. For such knowledge is beyond (the grasp of) inquiry through the discursive intellect.

For there are three levels of knowledge. Knowledge through the discursive intellect (*'ilm al-'aql*) is whatever knowledge you obtain either immediately<sup>31</sup> or as a result of inquiry concerning an "indicator",<sup>32</sup> provided that you discover the probative aspect of that indicator. And mistakes with regard to this kind of knowledge (come about) in the realm of that discursive thinking<sup>33</sup> which is linked together and typifies this type of knowledge. That is why they say about purely intellectual inquiry that some of it is sound, while some is invalid.

30. The long-lived archetype of direct divine inspiration - alluded to in the Qur'anic account of Moses' initiation in a famous long passage from the Sura of the Cave (18:65 ff.) - who played an important role in Sufism and popular Islamic spirituality more generally, and who Ibn 'Arabī personally met on at least three occasions, as he described in several famous passages of the *Futūhāt* which are now accessible in the recent biographical studies.

31. *Darūratan* ("necessarily"): i.e., anything that is known "by necessity" or self-evidently, in such a way that it cannot possibly be refuted or rejected. Here this term refers to the most basic, intrinsic logical grounds of all reasoning, such as the principle of non-contradiction and the like. But a few paragraphs later, Ibn Arabī also admits that the knowledge of *states* – i.e., the second level of knowing discussed here - is also "necessary" or "immediate" in this broad psychological sense.

32. *Dalīl*: in the technical language of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, this term can refer very broadly to any premise or argument or proof-text, or even to a natural phenomenon or event underlying such an argument - hence the importance of the inquirer's grasping the relevant "aspect" (*wajh*) of the particular "indicator" in question. Ibn 'Arabī's scepticism here regarding the epistemological reliability of such procedures typifies his attitude toward the questionable, highly fallible assumptions and procedures of such traditional disciplines throughout all his works.

33. As will become clearer in the course of the following discussion, Ibn Arabī's emphasis here is not on the intellective or rational dimension

The second (level of) knowledge is the knowledge of "states".<sup>34</sup> The only way to that is through immediate experience: it can't be defined intellectually, and no proof can ever establish that knowing. (It includes things) like knowledge of the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of aloes, the pleasure of intercourse, love, ecstasy, or passionate longing, and other examples of this sort of knowledge. It is impossible for someone to know this kind of knowledge without directly experiencing it and participating in it. ...

The third (level of) knowledge is knowledge of (divine) secrets:<sup>35</sup> this is the knowledge that is beyond the stage of the discursive intellect. It is knowledge of "*the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit in the heart*",<sup>36</sup> and it is peculiar to the prophets and the friends (of God). This knowledge is of two kinds. One kind is perceived by the intellect, just like the first (category of purely discursive) knowledge, except that the person who knows in this (inspired) way does

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of this sort of knowledge as such, but rather on the exclusive reliance upon the discursive mental processes of conceptual "thinking" (*fikr*) and loosely rationalising, discursive "inquiry" or "investigation" (*nazar*), which can lead to all sorts of error and self-delusion. In fact, purely "intellective" knowing or noesis (*'ilm al-'aql*: see n.22 above) is one of the essential types of inspired spiritual knowledge included in the third and highest level he outlines below.

34. *Ahwāl* (sing, *hāl*): in the traditional technical language of Sufism, this term usually refers to specifically *spiritual* states (corresponding to the highest, third level of "knowledge of mysteries" below). Here, however, Ibn 'Arabī is unusually using it - as well as the related common Sufi expression for "direct personal experience" (*dhawq*, literally "tasting") - in an unusually broad sense extending to the most basic levels of everyone's external and internal sensation.

35. *'ilm al-asrār* (sing, *sirr*): depending on the context or perspective, the latter term could also be translated as spiritual "mysteries". For example at the end of Ibn 'Arabī's "Letter (to his Tunisian Sufi friend) al-Mahdawī" which opens the *Futūḥāt*, he describes the purpose of this Introduction as "*setting forth the knowledge of the divine secrets/inner meanings this book contains*" (O.Y. I, 74.2).

36. The opening section of a famous hadith, recorded by Muslim and Ibn Hanbal, in which Muhammad alludes to his experience of divine inspiration: see Lane, s.v. *rū'*, and Wensinck, *Concordance*, II, p. 320. "Friend (of God)" here translates *al-walī*, while the term "prophet" (*nabī*) is to be understood - following Ibn 'Arabī's own distinctive usage - very broadly, extending from the "friends of God" of his own Islamic era, through the

not acquire their knowledge through discursive "inquiry" (*nazar*). Instead, the (divine) "level" of this knowledge bestows it upon them. The second kind (of divinely inspired knowledge) is of two sorts. The first sort is connected with the second (above-mentioned level of) knowledge (i.e., of inner "states"), except that this knower's state is more exalted. And the other sort is knowledge through (divine) "informing".<sup>37</sup>

... Therefore (to illustrate these three basic sorts of inspired "knowledge of secrets"), the Prophet's saying that a Garden actually exists is knowledge through being informed (by God). His saying with regard to the (Day of) Resurrection that "there is a Pool in it sweeter than honey" is (an example of) knowledge of states, which is knowledge by direct experience. And his saying that "God was, and nothing was with him" and other things like that are (illustrations of inspired) intellectual knowing (corresponding to the sound results of discursive understanding) perceived through inquiry. So as for this third broad level (including all three sorts of inspired knowing), which is the "knowledge of secrets", the person who knows it (fully) knows *all* knowledge and is completely immersed in it<sup>38</sup> - while the person who has those other (two lower levels of) knowledge is not like that. Hence there is no knowledge nobler than this "all-encompassing knowledge"<sup>39</sup> which embraces the entirety of knowable things!

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many pre-Islamic prophets designated as such in the Qur'an (or in a famous hadith which mentions their number as 124,000), as well as the much smaller group of prophetic "messengers" (*rusul*) bearing a particular divine "revealed-prescription" (*sharī'a*).

37. I.e., through God's directly "informing" (*ikhbār*) the prophet or saint, by means of one or another of the various forms of divine communication exemplified in the Qur'an and hadith, further developed and analysed by Ibn 'Arabī throughout the *Futūhāt*. The same Arabic phrase could also be read and understood as "through reports" (*akhbār*) - i.e., as communicated by God or some other angelic agency, as well as by a prophet or saint who has received such inspiration.

38. Literally, "knows all knowledges"; the last part of this phrase can also mean "is completely filled with them" or "completely masters them".

39. This Arabic phrase strongly - and no doubt intentionally - recalls many of the Qur'anic descriptions of God's Knowledge, reflecting Ibn 'Arabī's underlying metaphysical insistence on the cosmic "mirroring" reality of the "Perfect Human Being" (*al-insān al-kāmil*).

But as for truly intelligent and sensible people, who give right counsel to their soul, they don't reject someone reporting/informing about (such inspired knowledge). Instead, they say: "In my opinion it is possible that this person may be speaking truthfully or not." And that is how every truly intelligent person ought to behave whenever someone who is not infallible comes to them with this sort of (inspired) knowledge, as long as that person is speaking truthfully concerning the matter about which they have been "informed" (by inspiration). ... For giving credence to such a person will not harm you, as long as what they are reporting is not rationally impossible ... and so long as it doesn't undermine one of the pillars of the "revealed-prescription" (*sharī'a*) and doesn't contradict one of its essential principles.<sup>40</sup>

And I am the most worthy of those who give right counsel to their soul with regard to this. For if this person were only informing us about something (already) brought by the infallible (prophet) - only recounting to us what we already had from that (prophet) through another transmitted account<sup>41</sup> - then their re-port wouldn't give us anything beneficial beyond what we *already* have. But the (friends of God)<sup>42</sup> - may God be pleased with them!

40. It is important to underline here that the particular Arabic terms Ibn 'Arabī is using (*rukn* and *asl*) are clearly meant to stress the extremely narrow character of this limitation - i.e., restricted to the most fundamental and indisputable literal dimensions of Islamic *scripture*, as distinct from the historically elaborated, diversely institutionalised complex systems of intellectual interpretation developed in the later schools of *kalām* and *fiqh*. The broader political implications of the practically alternative understanding of Islam based on the decisive experience and guidance of the "friends of God" (*awliyā'*) which he begins to suggest here - and develops far more elaborately throughout the *Meccan Illuminations* - are summarised (based on key passages from the *Futūhāt*) in our article on "Ibn 'Arabī's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", in *Studia Islamica* LXXI (1990), pp. 37-64. See also E. Winkel, *Islam and the Living Law: the Ibn 'Arabī Approach* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1997).

41. *Riwāya*: clearly Ibn 'Arabī is alluding here to the familiar historical, oral (or written) chains of transmission of hadith in particular.

42. Ibn 'Arabī does not explicitly identify the individuals he is referring to here (using only the "they" included in the verb). But in the context, it can only be those having received something of the "knowledge of secrets" who - unlike the prophets - are *not* universally known to be absolutely



- only bring secrets/inner meanings and wisdom in regard to the inner meanings of the (divine) "revealed prescription" (*sharī'a*) concerning that which is *beyond* the power of thinking and acquisition (of transmitted reports), secrets which are never ever attained in any way except through direct witnessing and (divinely bestowed) confirmation and other paths like those.

Don't you see that if someone brought you (these fresh divine inspirations) as if they were a dream he had seen - wouldn't you try to interpret them and figure out what they really mean? So likewise, take whatever this Sufi brings you and let yourself be rightly guided by it for a little while. And open up the place of your (heart) for what he has brought to you, so that their inner meanings can become manifest to you. That is better for you than if you had to say on the Day of the Rising: [*When the True Promise draws near ...*] "*But we were heedless of this, indeed we were doing wrong!*" (21:97).

Now any knowledge whose meaning can be easily understood once it has been clearly explained, or which is easily accessible without difficulty to the quick-witted learner, belongs to (the lowest level of) knowledge (attained by) the inquiring (discursive) intellect, because it falls under its domain and includes what can be grasped independently by someone if they should inquire discursively (about it). But the "knowledge of secrets" isn't like that. For when the (rational) interpretive faculty takes it up, it becomes disagreeable, difficult and trying for the understanding to grasp. And sometimes weak and fanatic minds, those which haven't been successful in properly employing the reality of the intellect God gave them for inquiry and investigation, even spit out that (inspired spiritual) knowledge! So this is why those who possess this (inspired) knowledge most often make it more approachable for (most people's) understanding by using symbolic images and poetic forms of speech.

And as for the "knowledge of states", that is *between* this knowledge of secrets and knowledge (gained by discursive) intellects. Most of those who have faith in the knowledge of states are people who rely on their own spiritual experiences (*ahl al-tajārib*).

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truthful and without sin: i.e., the living "Friends of God" (*awliyā' Allāh*). The italicised points in the following sentences reflect strong explicit emphases in Ibn 'Arabī's own Arabic syntax here.

And the knowledge of states is closer to the knowledge of secrets than it is to the intellective knowledge gained by inquiry. ...<sup>43</sup> Therefore you should know that if this (kind of report concerning spiritual knowledge) seems good to you, and you accept it and have faith in it - then rejoice (in your good fortune)! For you are necessarily in a state of direct spiritual "unveiling" (*kashf*) concerning that, even if you aren't aware of it.

In the remainder of his lengthy Introduction to the *Futūhāt*, Ibn 'Arabī - after first stressing, quite typically, the grave spiritual dangers of *kalām* theology and the fact that everything he is about to explain is already best expounded within the Qur'an itself - responds to his own opening remark about a possible initial chapter of theological "creeds" by providing instead a series of three increasingly lengthy passages that correspond closely to the first three levels of cognition he had outlined in the opening section of his Introduction, just quoted. First, he gives a very basic, short and entirely unexplained "creed of the common people (*'awāmm*) among the people of mere outward submission and unthinking compliance (*taqlīd*), and the people of discursive inquiry" (i.e., the *kalām* theologians).<sup>44</sup> Next, partly relying on one of al-Ghazālī's influential popular theological works, he provides an intellectually more challenging "Treatise Concerning What is Well-Known Among the Beliefs of the People of External Forms".<sup>45</sup> Finally he moves on to another - far longer, more complex and quite mysterious - symbolic exposition "Concerning the Belief of the Elite Among the

43. In the few lines omitted here (1,147.6-9) Ibn 'Arabī points out that both the "knowledge of states" and the inspired "knowledge of (spiritual) secrets" are indeed "self-evident" or "immediate" (*darūrī*) in a way that resembles our immediate awareness of the logical first principles of rational knowledge. But he goes on to point out that such inspired knowledge is also entirely different, in that "*it is only self-evident to whoever witnesses it*" - and that direct spiritual witnessing (*mushāhada*) is limited to the prophets and the "friends of God".

44. It is worth noting that the purely formal "contents" summarised in this first credo are, in a way, eventually "explained" by all of the rest of the *Futūhāt*.

45. *Ahl al-rusūm*, i.e., religious scholars and intellectuals. This credo covers vol. I, pp.174-186 in the recent O. Yahya edition.

People of God, Between (Discursive) Inquiry and (Spiritual) Unveiling".<sup>46</sup>

But this is not the end. The fourth and highest level, that of accomplished realisation, cannot be summarised in such a way. That realised spiritual intelligence which is the primary subject and ultimate aim of this book, he concludes, has been intentionally "scattered" throughout its pages. His initial description of this ultimate goal of his writing here pointedly emphasises the universality and all-inclusiveness of the fully enlightened vision in question:

But as for presenting the creed of the quintessence (of the spiritual elite), I have not given it in detail in any one place, because of the profundities it contains. But I have given it scattered throughout the chapters of this book, exhaustively and clearly explained - but in different places, as we have mentioned. So those on whom God has bestowed the understanding of these things will recognise them and distinguish them from other matters. For this is the Knowing of the Real (*al-Haqq*) and the Truthful Saying, and there is no goal beyond It. "The blind and the truly seeing" *are alike* in Its regard!<sup>47</sup> It brings together things most far and most near, and conjoins the most high and most low. ...

Perhaps the richest illustration of that final "quintessential" directive to all his readers comes precisely at the very end of Ibn 'Arabī's work, in its immense closing chapter (560) of "*wise testimonial advice which can be of benefit to the seeker travelling the path, to the one who has arrived (at the Goal), and to whoever happens across it, if God wills.*"<sup>48</sup> The vast body of practical spiritual wisdom and tested advice recounted in this chapter - assembled

46. O.Y. I, 187-213.

47. Here Ibn 'Arabī appears to be playing with the familiar, expected Qur'anic contrast or opposition of the blind and spiritually seeing (cf. 6:50, etc.): he thereby alludes to the particularly universal character of the accomplished wisdom in question here - as he emphasises again in the vast concluding chapter 560 of this work: its title stresses that its contents concern both the novice or aspiring "seeker" (*murīd*) and the fully accomplished knower who has already "arrived" at the Goal (the *wāsil*).

48. IV, 444-554, one of the longest chapters of the entire work, often reprinted as a separate Arabic volume.

from countless classical Islamic and earlier sources - pointedly brings each of his readers back into that particular concrete historical and individual situation in which they started. So if anything has genuinely changed in the interval - with its 559 other "doorways" or chapters (*abwāb*) - Ibn 'Arabī emphasises, it is not in the outward forms of these already famous wise words and bits of spiritual advice, but in the potential transformation, within each reader, of that spirit and realisation which necessarily underlies, informs and guides their actual, unavoidably creative and ever-renewed communication and application of those teachings.

#### THE UNIVERSAL "BOOK"

In keeping with Ibn 'Arabī's highlighting of the centrality in the *Futūhāt* of the enlightened vision of the "quintessence of the elite", every student of his work, in whatever language, has already repeatedly encountered his recurrent assertions- in countless symbolic forms and applications - of the holographic nature of the divine "Book" (*al-kitāb*) and "Speaking" as they are equally manifest in the three homologously corresponding forms of revealed "Scripture" (including, as throughout the Qur'an, *all* of the prophets and messengers, and not only, or even primarily, the handful of historically surviving written texts); the entire Universe or "World" *al-'ālam*: i.e., *all* the levels of creation and manifestation); and the Spirit (including above all the human spirit, *rūh*, or highest dimensions of the soul). Given the centrality of this unifying perspective throughout all of Ibn 'Arabī's writings, not just the *Futūhāt*, simply to state it may well sound, for anyone even superficially acquainted with his work, like a mere truism - or, at best, merely a problematic metaphysical concept. Actually realising this central teaching, of course, is quite a different matter, and virtually everything in the *Futūhāt* - beginning most obviously with the famous opening chapters on the universal cosmogony of the divine "Letters" and Names - is designed to bring out one or another meaningful facet of this reality.

From that broadest possible perspective, then, the decisive evidence of a genuinely effective "translation" of any given

section of the *Futūhāt* is when Ibn 'Arabī's words actually do bring about a real spiritual "opening". That unmistakeable transforming effect is beautifully described in the course of the very beginning of his Introduction we have just cited, where he points out the immediate recognition and unshakeable positive certainty that can be occasioned by even the most allusive and indirect statement of an actually experienced spiritual reality:

For you are necessarily in a state of immediate "unveiling" (*kashf*) concerning that, even if you aren't aware of it. There's no other way: for the heart is not gladdened except by what it knows for sure to be *real* (*haqq*). And the (discursive) intellect can't enter in here, because this knowledge is not within its grasp.

Needless to say, this is *not* always the initial effect of many extant translations of Ibn 'Arabī's works, including the *Futūhāt*.

Part of the common set of obstacles to more effective translation and communication, in all cases, are the wide range of certain basic and unavoidable linguistic challenges that are discussed in more detail below (mainly in Part II). But far more significant, in many cases, are the relatively invisible and unexpected obstacles that arise whenever a translator – whether knowingly or unconsciously – renders a particular passage as they have understood it (to use Ibn 'Arabī's vivid language) "with the eye of", or from the restricted level of, their particular individual beliefs, conceptual understanding, or an inadequate degree of "unveiling". Since even the most assiduous, well-prepared and experienced students of Ibn 'Arabī still regularly find many passages which they do not fully and adequately understand at the appropriate level of realisation, we can be virtually certain that even the most able and devoted translators of whole longer chapters of the *Futūhāt* – as opposed to the carefully chosen excerpts and thematic summaries most scholars have cautiously provided until now – will necessarily be passing along versions of a number of important passages that they have grasped, at best, only at the level of their formal intellectual and external, literal coherence.<sup>49</sup> Fortunately, in many such cases – as we have

49. This is certainly one very significant – and virtually unavoidable – reason for the continued hesitancy of even the most knowledgeable scholars

already pointed out in emphasising the special usefulness of informal small group study - it is often actually possible for careful readers of quite inadequate translations to more effectively "re-translate" those versions of Ibn 'Arabī back into a spiritually more accurate and effective form.<sup>50</sup> This is because the indispensable spiritual illumination or "opening" as to his actual intention is, in every case, naturally dependent on factors of preparedness, situation and spiritual sensitivity which differ radically with each individual- just as they do with those corresponding intellectual and experiential spiritual gifts and endowments that the Shaykh himself highlighted to begin his Introduction to these *Futūhāt*.

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to provide full translations of longer chapters of the *Futūhāt* Faced with such a situation, we cannot help but recall the late Prof. Annemarie Schimmel's frequently repeated observation that "those who really understand the poetry of Hafez know how impossible it would be to translate him!"

50. In fact, this is precisely what 'Irāqī, Jāmī, Shabistārī, and so many other later poet-students of the Shaykh actually did. it should be stressed that this observation about the capacities of dedicated readers working with translations is not at all a matter of evaluating the qualifications and capacities of particular translators. Rather, as is further illustrated in several sections below, all translators of the *Futūhāt* - even those who might understand some parts perfectly - are still faced with almost insuperable challenges in actually communicating all the relevant dimensions of their understanding into another Western language, such as English or French.

In many cases, translators are also faced constantly with a gamut of choices involving unavoidable trade-offs between equally essential goals - such as fluency, clarity, conceptual coherency, explication of allusions and background, and so on. For example - to take one of the most obvious of such dilemmas - any helpful explanation by the translator of unclear allusions, cross-references, hidden structures, multiple intended meanings, mysterious symbols and the like will inevitably rob readers in translation of many of those originally intended individual efforts (*ijtihād*) of thought, reflection and further study which Ibn 'Arabī clearly meant for his readers to develop through their own efforts of individual realisation. Being informed of those various connections by a translator or commentator clearly does not get the reader to the same ultimate result, once we understand that the primary purpose of such devices often lies precisely in the deeper intellectual and spiritual efforts and processes to which such recurrent rhetorical methods give rise.

As we have repeatedly verified with classroom readings of various English translations of the Qur'an, Hafez and other texts raising similar difficulties to those encountered with Ibn 'Arabī, students with a minimum of essential background information, native intelligence, and spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity are soon mysteriously able to "spot" intuitively, almost immediately and unfailingly, many of those places where the translator has failed to comprehend or to convey all the intended dimensions of Ibn 'Arabī's writing, and has instead communicated something at the level, for example, simply of the words' outward form (i.e., of "belief"), or of a misleadingly restricted intellectual or symbolic coherence. Equally important as an essential touchstone for the actual experience of genuine realisation in respect to any of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings is the reader's subsequently enriched capacity for immediate, spontaneous awareness of the same spiritual laws and realities wherever they are actually encountered, whatever the particular tradition, form, context or individuals in question.

Wherever that typically "Akbarian" universal depth of perspective is lacking - and allowing for the understandable concessions to piety or prudence required in works translated in certain settings, or specifically for certain limited audiences - experienced readers can usually quickly sense that fundamental incompleteness even in translation. Thus we can be fairly certain that a significant problem of translation has arisen whenever it seems impossible, even with great intellectual agility, to see any sort of deeper spiritual "opening" or realisation actually in prospect. This is regularly the case, for example, whenever a translation makes it seem like Ibn 'Arabī is simply providing an explanatory commentary on a particular scriptural passage or hadith; is apparently justifying some limited theological point; or is no more than explaining or recalling some already familiar literary or intellectual body of knowledge.

#### EVERYONE CAN PLAY

Because of each of the essential considerations that have been discussed above, it should be clear by now that the rhetoric of

the *Meccan Illuminations* is carefully designed to engage, awaken, teach and guide every possible reader who is engaged - as we all ultimately are, albeit with radically different degrees of conscious awareness and active intention - in the essential human process of realisation. No human being has more privileged access than any other to the two key "Books" of the world and their own spirit - and indeed the latter, the most essential of all, is the unique treasure and divine "Trust" (33:72) bestowed uniquely on each human being. So those familiar with Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of this three-fold Book as the intrinsically universal revelation quickly come to two fundamental realisations. First, his insights at every point reflect profoundly the essential teachings of *all* the prophetic, historically revealed "Books", far beyond those particular ones he usually quotes explicitly (just as his "Muhammadan Reality" encompasses all of those revelations). And secondly, that literal familiarity with this or that historical form of scripture - when embedded in problematic individual and wider cultural forms of belief and all the complexities of the restrictive intellect - often constitutes a profoundly rooted unconscious barrier to genuine spiritual intelligence and receptivity to those forms of inspiration that are indispensable for spiritual advancement.

As we follow Ibn 'Arabī's own guidelines in his Introduction, briefly summarised in the previous section, his language in these *Meccan Illuminations* is carefully constructed to set up a constantly shifting set of "spiritual mirrors"<sup>51</sup> designed to reveal to each of his readers and interpreters, at each moment they seriously encounter these "Openings", those particular dimensions of their being and understanding which are momentarily determined by their own unique nexus of the possible "levels" of belief, restrictive intellect, immediate experience, and active spiritual intelligence - with all the decisive individual nuances and extremes that are operating at each of those levels. Anyone

51. Or perhaps today, we should say "scanners" - since that contemporary image more accurately conveys the essentially "three-dimensional", constantly multi-faceted nature of this process, always within a given individual, and even more obviously when we consider different readers of his work.



who might not be clear how this is actually the case has only to think of the spectrum of critical and interpretive literatures about Ibn 'Arabī (as much the *Fusūs al-Hikam* as the *Futūhāt*) now available in Western languages, or reported in reviews and critical studies. For there it is immediately apparent that the particular cognitive "levels" at which each interpreter primarily encounters and describes their experience of the Shaykh's writing is usually unmistakably (sometimes even embarrassingly) obvious, particularly when such writers indulge in polemics against others who happen to have focused on different dimensions of the Shaykh's teaching and intentions.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, since the intellectual comprehension of the *Futūhāt* – especially for modern readers (of *any* cultural, linguistic and religious background), who are inevitably unfamiliar with so much of its original cultural context – requires elaborate explanatory and background contextualisation, it is all too easy for most potential readers to assume that Ibn 'Arabī was primarily writing this book as an *intellectual* (i.e., primarily philosophical or theological) composition which is therefore really accessible only to a handful of specialised scholars and students.

With regard to Ibn 'Arabī's own potential and intended audiences, at least, nothing could be further from the truth. As anyone teaching in the field of religious and spiritual studies quickly discovers, the distribution of particular spiritual gifts, insights, capacities, and degrees and forms of spiritual intelligence and sensitivity to be found among human beings have nothing at all to do, in their roots, with the outward accidents

52. See our collected volume of studies *Ibn 'Arabī and His interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives*, which brings together ten monographs and articles, and nearly thirty reviews, all devoted to contextualising the work and influences of Ibn 'Arabī, and to situating the immense range of recent translations, interpretive studies, biographies and works by and about later Muslim interpreters. Downloadable versions (.pdf format) of all of these works, including the long, three-part review article on "Ibn 'Arabī and His Interpreters" (in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1986-87), are currently freely available at the website of the Ibn 'Arabī Society ([www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi)), until they can be brought together in published book form.

of age, culture and upbringing; and they appear to be considerably more widely distributed than the gifts of exceptional intellectual abilities. For that vast group of spiritually prepared potential readers, then, it is extremely important to know that the striking *spiritually autobiographical* portions of these *Meccan Illuminations* - and those who spend much time with this author soon come to recognise that there is actually very little in his approach to the Qur'an and hadith that is *not* profoundly autobiographical<sup>53</sup> - constitute what is certainly the most extensive "phenomenology of spiritual experience" to be found in Islamic tradition, perhaps even in all world literature.<sup>54</sup> Most readers

53. This openly phenomenological, experiential dimension - conveyed through Ibn 'Arabī's references to his companions, other famous Sufis, and the Prophet as much as in explicitly autobiographical passages - is far more openly displayed here than in the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, especially since that aspect of the Shaykh's work was not the primary interest of later generations of more philosophical commentators on the *Fusūs*. Particularly helpful in this regard are the series of key early spiritual illuminations which have been highlighted by both of Ibn 'Arabī's recent biographers; S. Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabī* (Oxford, Anqa, 1999); and C Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabī* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993). His account of one of the most important of those initiatic visions, expressed in his discussion of his own and other spiritual ascensions in chapter 367 of the *Futūhāt*, is now readily available in our translation included in *Ibn 'Arabī: The Meccan Revelations* (New York, Pir Publications, 2002); that version is helpfully supplemented by additional notes and corresponding autobiographical material translated from his earlier *K. al-Isrā* that is also included in our long article on "The Spiritual Ascension; Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj", in *JAOS*, vol 107 (1987), pp. 629-52, and vol. 108 (1988), pp. 63-77 (now available for downloading at [www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi)).

54. We have dealt with the subject of the multiple, ongoing influences of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas - passing through a number of different channels - on many aspects of the contemporary study of religion and spirituality in a number of recent studies, including "Ibn 'Arabī in the 'Far West': Visible and invisible influences", in *JMIAS*, XXIX (2001), pp. 87-122; the final chapter of *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation*; and "From Cordoba to Isfahan, and Beyond; Mulla Sadra, Ibn 'Arabī and the Emerging Science of Spirituality", to appear in the *Proceedings* of the Isfahan Conference on Islamic Philosophy, ed, H. Landolt and M. Mohaghegh (title and

approaching the *Futūhāt* within its intended context of active realisation are likely to find many of these particular "openings" to be readily identifiable and immediately, intuitively accessible and "speaking",<sup>55</sup> in precisely the way that, as we have seen, Ibn 'Arabī describes and encourages that sort of affinity at the very beginning of his Introduction:

Therefore you should know that if this (report of the inspired "knowing of spiritual secrets") seems good to you, and you accept it and have faith in it - then rejoice! For you are necessarily in a state of immediate "unveiling" concerning that, even if you aren't consciously aware of it. There's no other way: for the heart is not gladdened except by what it knows for sure to be true.

Again, in highlighting the absolutely central role of *trusting one's own intuitions* as both the starting point and the ultimate touchstone in any spiritually effective reading of these *Futūhāt*, it is essential to keep in mind Ibn 'Arabī's guiding intention so beautifully summarised in the epigraph above.<sup>56</sup> As he points out there, the whole purpose of all this is the gradual unfolding of each reader's *own* spiritual intelligence, of our uniquely human capacity to perceive the whole world and *all* our experience – i.e., *both* the inextricable sets of outer and inner divine "Signs ...

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publisher t.b.a.), 2004. See also the related studies brought together in W. Chittick's *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, SUNY, 1994).

55. Thus in reality the most directly accessible, revealing and fascinating sections of the *Futūhāt* for readers particularly interested in spirituality are likely to be in Part V (the *fasl al-munāzalāt*, an untranslatable term describing his "mutual encounters with God"), in chapters 384-461, near the end of the book. A considerable number of selections from that Part are now readily accessible in Chittick, *SDG*,

56. Drawn from a particularly influential section (chapter 366, on "The Mahdī's Helpers"), which focuses on the central dimensions of spiritual perception and communication. See our translation from that chapter in *Ibn 'Arabī The Meccan Revelations*, and the commentary on that passage which forms the central chapter of *Orientations: ...* ("Ibn 'Arabī and the Tasks of Spiritual Creativity and insight"), as well as "Ibn 'Arabī's Messianic Secret: From 'The Mahdī' to the Imamate of Every Soul", in *JMIAS*, XXX (2001), pp. 1 - 19.

*making clear the Real*" (41:53) - directly as "divine New-Speaking" (*ḥadīth ilāhī*). And then, having understood, to begin to appropriately "interpret" and apply that ever-present Guidance, This is the spirit in which he encourages his most apt and properly prepared readers, at the very beginning of these "Openings", to pay attention to each of those indispensable, intimate, and uniquely personal forms through which we can begin to "read" these manifestations of the One divine "Book":

But they (the true "knowers") - may God be pleased with them! - only bring secrets and wisdom concerning the secrets/inner meanings of the revelation, about that which is beyond the power of discursive thinking and intellectual acquisition, secrets which are never ever attained in any way *except* through direct witnessing and (divinely inspired) confirmation and other paths like those. Do you not see that if someone brought you (these inspirations) as if they were a dream he had seen - wouldn't you try to interpret them and figure out what they really mean? So likewise, take whatever this Sufi brings you and let yourself be rightly guided by it for a little while. And open up your place (of your heart) for what he has brought you, so that their inner meanings can become manifest to you.<sup>57</sup>

What happens when one begins to pay careful attention to such apparently "random" intuitions, to follow the subtle threads of divine guidance and spiritual discernment they always provide, is intimately familiar to everyone consciously engaged in the process of realisation. As for those who might still imagine, after reading such explicit and pointedly detailed admonitions - which are repeatedly scattered throughout the *Futūḥāt* - that Ibn 'Arabī's purpose in repeatedly describing his own spiritual experiences and those of his contemporaries, along with those of the Prophet and so many earlier friends of God, throughout this immense work, is somehow simply to point to their useful "authority" in supporting this or that particular otherwise familiar and straightforwardly accessible intellectual or dogmatic position: such readers, he reminds us, are still unconsciously

57. In emphasising this same idea, Ibn 'Arabī often cites one of his favourite ḥadīth, "Seek the judgment (*fatwā*) of your own heart, no matter what judgment others may give... ."

wandering, for the moment, in this or that lower "hall of mirrors", with no effective awareness of what that central human task of realisation actually involves. But Ibn 'Arabī has many devices designed precisely to awaken those readers as well.

#### INTEGRATING SPIRITUAL DISCOVERIES: PARADOX AND PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS

Given the different levels of belief and awareness that Ibn 'Arabī highlights, as we have just seen, at the very beginning of his *Meccan Illuminations*, it should be clear that virtually all of us - excepting only certain prophets and saints - are still in many respects like the prisoners in that Cave Socrates carefully describes in the *Republic* (Bk. V), unconsciously "chained" to and governed by the particular sets of blinders, of distorting lenses and illusions which make it impossible for us to read any of the divine Books, whether of creation or of our souls, "*as they really are*".<sup>58</sup> Or as Ibn 'Arabī makes quite clear in his fascinating eschatological discussions scattered throughout this book, we normally find ourselves both suffering and inflicting suffering somewhere among the various "descending stairways" of Gehenna, entranced by illusory "fires" rather than the true "lights" of the Spirit. It should not be that surprising, then - echoing what Socrates had prophetically explained about the reactions likely to be encountered by anyone who might try to tell those cave-dwellers about the *real* world of the Sun - to learn that Ibn 'Arabī immediately follows his initial allusion to these different levels of knowing in his Introduction by quoting three impassioned, highly revealing declarations from three of the most highly respected Companions of the Prophet.

Each of those memorable statements explicitly emphasises the existence of centrally significant elements of divinely revealed spiritual teaching that Muhammad (and by implication, many other major spiritual teachers) had not *publicly* disseminated because those particular teachings would so shock most people,

58. Alluding to a Prophetic prayer which Ibn 'Arabī often cites: "O my God, cause me to see things as they really are!"

restricted as they are within the lower levels of belief, that they would immediately kill anyone who attempted the wider public communication of those teachings, beyond the circle of those already spiritually apt to receive them in private.<sup>59</sup> Ibn 'Arabī's pointed citation of these three successive authoritative statements takes on added special significance in light of what he goes on to say twice, in the middle and at the very end of his Introduction already quoted above, about his intentional "scattering" throughout the *Futūhāt* of his most fundamental teachings, those reserved for "the quintessence of the spiritual elite". Since a fuller explanation of the manifold implications and intricate connections between those two decisive passages of his Introduction would require a long essay in itself - and extensive reference to parallel considerations and rhetorical assumptions pervading many other areas of Islamic esoteric thought, writing and culture - we must leave it to thoughtful readers to work out those absolutely fundamental implications for themselves, in the light of their own exploration and realisation of these "Openings",

In any case, what is most important for beginning readers of the *Futūhāt* to keep in mind, in reflecting on those remarks, is the very simple and familiar reality, one which we can all observe repeatedly, for example, in the relations between parents and children, or between experts in a particular discipline and novices or outsiders. This is that we cannot really "explain" or teach any particular spiritual phenomenon or direct experience of

59. O.Y. I, 142-4. Equally importantly (and again closely paralleling Plato's teaching), he pointedly stresses that those killing such a forthright spiritual teacher would actually think that they were somehow doing "good" and even self-righteously following their teacher's own pronouncements! It is important to note that the three esteemed authorities Ibn 'Arabī cites here are not somehow recondite or dubious, and that their words do contain some important hints about the particular types of teachings involved. The sayings of Abū Hurayra and Ibn 'Abbās -two of the foremost initial transmitters of hadith, particularly concerning the meanings of the Qur'an and spiritual teachings of the Prophet - are included in the canonical Sunni hadith collections, while the poem of 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib is cited from "the Sharīf al-Rādī (presumably referring to his famous compilation of 'Alī's teachings in the *Nahj ai-Bafāgha*).

reality (the actual *results* of the existential process of *tahqīq*) to someone who has not yet "been there" and actually experienced that same reality for themselves. The results of *any* such attempt, as we soon learn, are inevitable misunderstanding and often grotesque misrepresentation, which may be comic or- as Ibn 'Arabī has just powerfully emphasised in these repeated opening cautions - memorably tragic, depending on the particular surrounding circumstances. The possibilities of resulting misunderstandings - and the corresponding challenges of effective spiritual teaching - are especially dramatic and kaleidoscopic when, as in the case of the different dimensions of belief and "knowing" Ibn 'Arabī outlines in his Introduction, the various "levels" involved are not really successive at all, but more like integral and inseparable aspects of spiritual intelligence, dimensions of a single living whole which are potentially explosive and dangerously misleading if *any one* of those partial elements (belief, critical intellect, inspired experience, etc.) is taken in isolation from the larger Reality it inadequately reflects,

Ibn 'Arabī's endlessly fascinating rhetorical response to that unavoidable and distinctively human situation - inspired on almost every point by fundamental features of the uniquely revealing discourse of the Qur'an - is twofold. First, he seeks above all to provoke and bring to conscious awareness all the internal contradictions, limitations and metaphorical "short-sightedness" - and the fundamental, far-reaching ignorance - of each of his readers insofar as they may be locked into one particular lower form of perception (belief, intellectual reasoning, inspiration, etc.). At the same time, he is equally devoted to highlighting and probing that characteristic inner "cognitive dissonance" which exists whenever our conscious self is caught or torn between two very *different* levels of "knowing". This is especially visible, for example, in the familiar processes by which we gradually discover the deeper meanings of our dreams, inspirations, intuitions and so many other forms of spiritual experience, precisely through ongoing reflection on their meaningful interactions with all the relevant particular dimensions of our experience and the events constituting our particular destiny.<sup>60</sup>

On a more practical, interpersonal level, most people have

already encountered the precise practical spiritual equivalents of many of Ibn 'Arabī's essential literary and rhetorical methods in their corresponding experiences with effective teachers, therapists, counsellors, and spiritual guides and mentors (whatever the various cultural "garments" and historical forms in question). So it is absolutely important to keep all our relevant personal experiences in those domains in mind whenever we approach the reading of the *Futūhāt* - so much of which must be studied, if we are approaching it within the framework of realisation, precisely in light of those specific dreams, visions, and so many other telling "coincidences" and revelatory experiences that *do* so fortuitously happen to arise in conjunction with our process of reading, study and reflection. Incidentally, most of the points to be made in this regard already apply to the study of Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusūs al-Hikam* as well - but with all the obvious differences flowing from the basic fact that the *Futūhāt* are so many times more extensive and more complex, in both their range of subjects and their corresponding multiplicity of literary and rhetorical forms.

In other words, just as a particular story, joke, question or gesture can be decisively transforming or revealing in a particular individual spiritual constellation (and *only* there), the apparently "same" items will often be irrelevant or insignificant in any other context.<sup>61</sup> This recurrent rhetorical feature of Ibn 'Arabī's

60. One cannot overemphasise the key role throughout the *Futūhāt* - both in motivating each reader's continued seeking, and in providing the indispensable experiential "raw data" for the process of realisation - of what Ibn 'Arabī and other Islamic spiritual teachers normally call "the secret/ inner meaning of (one's personal) destiny", *sirr al-qadr*. This same leitmotif of the *sirr al-qadr* - serving as a shorthand expression for each reader's unique process of realisation - is highlighted in even more dramatic forms throughout Book I of Rumi's famous *Mathnawī*

61. In this respect, as we have already intimated at n.12 above, the relationship between the serious reader of the *Futūhāt* and the exploration of that text *within the context of realisation* (i.e., where the reader becomes increasingly constantly conscious and attentive to the significance of all the accompanying inner and outer events and experiences that occur or are recalled and illuminated in the course of study) closely corresponds to the transforming experience of the central spiritual process of "companionship"



writing constantly bedevils translators (as it already did the classical commentators of his *Fusūs*), since the very process of "exposing" and explaining many of his characteristic puns, paradoxes, subtle allusions, language-games, intentional self-contradictions, jokes and the like - most of which would otherwise entirely escape modern readers, often even in the Arabic - almost inevitably brings down to a complexly "intellectual" and strictly rational level this distinctively baroque language which was originally intended to alternately shock, surprise, confuse, intrigue, and delight his readers, or simply to make them laugh. (Students of religion are well aware of the more general way later rationalising, classical "commentaries" on originally provocative and self-contradictory or hyperbolic "spiritual paradoxes", such as the famous Sufi *shatahāt*, Zen koans, and many of Jesus' parables in the Gospels, almost always have precisely this unintentionally diminishing, reductive spiritual effect.) Therefore modern-day readers of the *Futūhāt*, especially from non-Islamic backgrounds, if they wish to experience more of the intended effects of Ibn 'Arabī's writing, are obliged to be even more active and co-participatory readers, "re-translating" Ibn 'Arabī's language, as best as they can, so that it is directly applicable, for example, to *our own* operative unexamined "beliefs" and unconscious patterns, even if those happen to be outwardly quite different from the particular operative piety and platitudes Ibn 'Arabī once assumed in his original historical audiences.

As indicated by some of our wider allusions above, there are indeed a host of different recurrent literary and rhetorical methods for invoking the internal self-contradictions, actual "ignorance" (hidden by conditioned beliefs), and hidden spiritual awarenesses which are so often the targets of Ibn 'Arabī's writing in the *Futūhāt*. And the best way to discover those methods and to appreciate how they actually work is not through any abstract analysis, but simply by paying close attention to each one of them while studying particular passages in the company of a small group of fellow explorers. Since we already "know" -

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(*suhba*) with *an* authentic spiritual master in the wider Sufi tradition (and to its effective equivalents elsewhere).

in at least one of the four possible operative senses that Ibn 'Arabī outlines at the beginning of his work - that we all *are* essentially "spirit", and that that same Spirit is ultimately the common Reality informing all three holographically overlapping "Books" of existence, it is clear that every imaginable reader already is part of the intended audience of these "Openings". So given their intentionally multi-faceted, multi-dimensional construction, we can be confident that if we simply move ahead, we will eventually find and be drawn to precisely those facets of the *Futūhāt* which effectively mirror our own complex spiritual state, each time we "open" this book.<sup>62</sup> It is particularly important for "unprepared", non-scholarly readers to keep this reassuring point in mind, since it is so tempting to get caught up in resolving the many more limited intellectual "puzzles" which are also an important part of the construction of this work.<sup>63</sup>

Rather than focusing in isolation on Ibn 'Arabī's detailed rhetorical and literary techniques for forcing (and revealing) those fundamental inner shifts in "perspective" which are always involved in the process of spiritual integration, it may be more practically helpful to start by highlighting two immense fields in which the relevance of those tools is particularly evident, since each individual reader's own unique spiritual "input" is so obviously indispensable in each case. The first field is the all-encompassing domain of eschatology, a subject which - given its extraordinary primacy and complexity already in the Qur'an and hadith - provides so much of the classical Islamic symbolism, conceptual apparatus and technical terminology for all dimensions of spiritual realisation. The second - almost equally vast, and ultimately inseparable - field is that of spiritual guidance and direction, including the "spiritual hierarchy" in all its expressions and manifestations, (in both of these areas, inciden-

62, In this regard, as in so many others, the actual experience of studying the *Futūhāt* intimately parallels that of reading its near-contemporary, the *Zohar*, in which outwardly "chance" scriptural "openings" likewise reveal and mirror at each stage the spiritual evolution of the central characters - and of the serious reader.

63. See the following section (in forthcoming Part II) for the key role of recurrent structural "puzzles" throughout the *Futūhāt*.

tally, readers without Arabic or extensive Islamic background will find it highly revealing to read and study the available selections from the *Futūhāt* in parallel with Nicholson's complete translation of Rumi's *Mathnawī*, a classical and virtually contemporaneous masterpiece which so continuously, and even more openly and directly, confronts its readers with the pertinent issues of their own personal degree of "realisation" and hypocrisy. In each of these two fields.) Finally, both of these phenomenological domains are also especially fascinating because their basic existential themes - often expressed in visibly cognate forms - are normally situated at the heart of almost all the historically familiar traditions of spiritual guidance. This means that most readers today - whose cultural background so often inescapably draws on many different historical traditions - can approach Ibn 'Arabī's complex exploration of these key facets of the process of realisation without being unconsciously restricted by the "belief"-level and presuppositions of any particular set of historical forms.

Probably no other "original" writer in the Islamic tradition has written so much - and certainly such *lastingly influential* discussions - in both of these key spiritual areas. In particular, Ibn 'Arabī's detailed accounts of the spiritual hierarchy, of the "members", roles, characteristics and functions of hundreds of spiritual figures and types among the "Friends of God" - the vast majority of them nominally hidden, but often manifested in fascinating historical personalities whom he has actually encountered and frequented during his many travels - are a central and recurring feature of these *Futūhāt*, from beginning to end.<sup>64</sup>

64. See above all M. Chodkiewicz's invaluable and pioneering *The Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī* (n.19 above). However, those who have not yet embarked on the study of the *Futūhāt* are not likely to realise that this magisterial study, focusing as it does on Ibn 'Arabī's own vision of his *own* unique spiritual function, actually provides only the "tip of the iceberg" in relation to the central role, both theoretical and highly practical, of *walāya* and the "friends of God" throughout the entire *Meccan illuminations*. In particular, it soon becomes clear to any careful reader of the *Futūhāt* that Ibn 'Arabī is not simply concerned with explaining a "doctrine" and phenomena somehow situated at a

So it is possible - since in this particular case (as compared with eschatology) the explicit symbolic resources provided by Islamic scripture are relatively limited - to take Ibn 'Arabī's own accounts as themselves the primary source for a system of complex beliefs or an intellectually coherent conceptual account of these hierarchical realities and functions, as some later Muslim commentators have occasionally very partially attempted.<sup>65</sup> And likewise, the thousands of powerful (and richly evocative and mysterious) Qur'anic verses and corresponding corpus of hadith relating to our ultimate human destiny were, within a few centuries, pieced together into the complex classical "dramaturgies" and schemas of belief, of philosophically or theologically coherent eschatological accounts, which were already a traditional part of the beliefs and intellectual assumptions and preoccupations of Ibn 'Arabī's contemporaries and his original audiences.<sup>66</sup>

Yet while translators and other describers of Ibn 'Arabī's "thought" in the *Futūhāt* can more or less conscientiously re-create and analyse the underlying sources and historical traditions connected with his own discussions,<sup>67</sup> these are two

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"distance" from his readers - but also, and perhaps even primarily, in awakening their deeper awareness of the corresponding spiritual dimensions and relevance of *their own* experience and realization.

65. See the preceding note. In fact, the *awliyā'* and their forms of inner knowing, spiritual insights, discoveries and conditions are almost certainly the single most common individual subject of the particular chapter titles of the *Futūhāt*.

66. Here one is again struck by the central role of al-Ghazālī's immensely influential writings (n. 12 above) as a kind of constant foil or initial "spring-board" for Ibn 'Arabī's deeper spiritual teaching throughout the *Futūhāt*. This is particularly obvious, for example, in relation to the concluding eschatological volume of Ghazālī's immense *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, on "The Remembrance of Death", now readily available in T. Winter's beautifully presented translation (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1997). The constant interplay of al-Ghazālī's and Ibn 'Arabī's contrasting approaches is also clearly visible throughout Mulla Sadra's later vast philosophical "translation" of the *Futūhāt*, including his famous *Wisdom of the Throne* (*al-Hikmat al-'Arshiyya*: see our translation and commentary, at n.10 above).

67. And some of their readers can still, as in the past, even turn Ibn 'Arabī

central areas in which it is particularly and unavoidably obvious that all readers wishing to ascend beyond the levels of popular beliefs and intellectual discussion of symbols are forced to begin with their own relevant experiences, and with those reflections (and further experiences) that then arise precisely in the *'interactions* between their own probative "unveiling" and "finding", and the host of pertinent scriptural symbols and allusions discussed throughout the *Futūhāt*. Not surprisingly, when we turn to working with integral, adequately contextualised translations of Ibn 'Arabī's chapters on these subjects, it turns out that most of his actual writing is clearly oriented precisely toward awakening and elucidating his readers' own significant experiences and insights, and toward challenging or undermining those usually unconscious mindsets and assumptions - the most far-reaching and determinative forms of "belief" - that keep them from perceiving the full significance of their *own* "Books" and their *own* discoveries of Guidance.<sup>68</sup>

In fact, the process he puts all his readers through, at every stage of their exploration of this text, is perfectly parallel to the ongoing wider process of realisation itself. That is to say, whatever the subject in question, Ibn 'Arabī's reader, at each stage, is first normally obliged to form a kind of working hypothesis as to what Ibn 'Arabī "really" means and intends, based on that reader's unique synthesis of their own relevant "beliefs", "knowledge", comparable experiences and degree of spiritual insight. Then, as a result, we are usually left with a considerably heightened awareness of what we actually do *not* truly "know" (but at best believe or assume), and a resulting familiar sort of shaky

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into their own source of beliefs, despite all his repeated efforts to forestall that sort of recurrent "idolatry".

68. In this regard, see the historically influential illustration provided by his complex treatment of "the Mahdi" and "the Imam" outlined in our three inter-related translations (from chapter 366) and studies already cited at n. 56 above. One of the particularly important hints Ibn 'Arabī gives about how to read his *Futūhāt* within a context of realisation is constituted by his entire chapter 559 (on the successive "secrets/inner meanings" of each chapter of this work); a number of representative shorter selections from that chapter are already scattered throughout W. Chittick's SDG.

uncertainty about our guiding intuitions and assumptions, along with an essential hunger for further confirmation or clarification which Ibn 'Arabī somehow suggests may be found elsewhere in the *Futūhāt*.<sup>69</sup> While that resulting deeper desire for further clarification and illumination (discussed in the following section [in Part II]) usually does provide sufficient motivation for his readers to keep working and moving "ahead" - a term placed in quotes here because most of his readers quickly learn how illusory such notions of a smooth forward progress can often be! - they typically also discover that Ibn 'Arabī's next discussion of that same problematic topic, while it may resolve certain relatively superficial literary and intellectual puzzles, in fact tends to suggest new, previously unsuspected perspectives.

Ultimately, the accumulating pressure of those puzzles, quandaries, tensions and unresolved contradictions naturally forces his readers back into the spiritually indispensable domain of their *own* wider experience (at all levels) - and eventually to a deeper, if even more consciously provisional, awareness of all that is involved in these existentially unavoidable spiritual questions. Above all, when it is continued over time, this characteristically *dynamic* intended effect of Ibn 'Arabī's constant alternation of promising allusions, scriptural symbols, and phenomenological accounts of his own and others' decisive experiential "openings" - together with its troubling reminders of our own deeper ignorance and uncertainty - tends to awaken his readers to those deeper forms of real evidence that can *only* be readily discovered in those worlds (and "Books") that are actually at hand: worlds, we soon learn - if any further reminder were still needed - whose illumination is always intimately connected with our own corresponding *responses* of right action and intention.

69. Again, this highlights the close phenomenological parallel of ultimate aims and intentions - albeit with outwardly very different rhetorical devices - between the *Futūhāt* and the intended results of Plato's equally unique mastery of the dramatic dialogue form.