

# Rediscovering the "Divine Comedy": Eschatology and spiritual realisation in Ibn 'Arabi

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# Rediscovering the “Divine Comedy”: Eschatology and Spiritual Realisation in Ibn 'Arabī

*The following is an extract from a series of four lectures given by Professor James W. Morris at the Sorbonne, Paris, in May and June 2003. These lectures are based largely upon Chapters 61–65 of the Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya in which Ibn 'Arabī describes the process of spiritual realisation through the symbolism of heaven, hell and the degrees of the life after death. This extract is taken from the first lecture, where Jim Morris outlines the general background to these more detailed discussions.*

It is possible to describe Ibn 'Arabī's general approach to spiritual intelligence in terms of a kind of standard philosophical “system” with its corresponding schemas of ontology and epistemology. Indeed extensive traditions of later Islamic thought, beginning with the classical commentaries on his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and ending with the influential philosophical school of Mulla Sadra and his later interpreters, have spent centuries doing just that. But Ibn 'Arabī, for compelling reasons of his own, did not. His ultimate purpose was not to demonstrate to his readers a philosophical system or to convey to them some particular limited body of religious, ethical, or even spiritual beliefs and teachings.

Instead, it is to awaken in each reader, within their own unique situation, their own immediate and effective awareness of the ultimate direction and meaning (*sens*) of their life...

Chapter 317 of *The Meccan Illuminations* (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*) contains some of the most succinct and vivid allusions to Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of the universal “Divine Comedy” and its ultimate significance for each human being. Like most chapters of that work, it is a sort of extended commentary on a single brief Qur'ānic passage (68:1–2): “Blessed be He...Who created death and life in order to test you all, which of you is best/most beautiful in action”. Its main subject – already foreshadowing our following lecture here on the “Fire”, *Gehenna* and the “school of suffering” – is that ongoing “testing” which is the ultimate purpose of human existence. Ibn 'Arabī's own conception of that metaphysical situation – remarkably paralleling in so many ways Plato's complex imagery of the Sun-line-cave at the centre of the Republic – is beautifully summarised in the final words of that chapter, in his archetypal image of the children's shadow-theatre of this world.

“Whoever wants to know the inner reality of what we have alluded to concerning this

question [i.e. of the deeper reasons for death, suffering, ignorance and wrongdoing in this transient world] should reflect on the Image/Imagination (*khayāl*) of the screen and the forms (of the cosmic shadow Play). Who is the Speaker, for the little children who are far from the veil of the screen set up between them and the person playing with those characters and speaking through them?

Now that is just how it is with the forms of the world: most people are those little children we just mentioned – so you should know how it is that happened to them! The little ones at that show are happily playing and having great fun: (and likewise) the heed-

less ones consider (this life only) an amusement and pastime. But those who truly know, reflect and see more deeply, and they realize that God has only established this as a symbol/likeness (*mathal*).

That is why at the beginning of the show a person comes out who is called the “Describer”. He delivers a speech in which he glorifies God and praises Him. Then he talks in turn about every sort of form that will emerge behind that screen after him, and he informs the audience that God has established all this as a likeness for His servants, so that they can reflect on it and come to know that the world, in relation to God, is like these shadow-forms with the person who is moving them, and that this veil is the mystery of Destiny (*sirr al-qadar*) governing the creatures.

Yet despite all this, the heedless ones take it to be an amusement and pastime, as in God's saying (concerning): “...those who have taken their religion to be an amusement and pastime [and have been deluded by the life of this world... They forgot the meeting (with God) this Day and denied Our Signs.” (Qur'ān 7:51).... ”

In terms of this particular image, one could say that the subject of our following lectures is simply how Ibn 'Arabi suggests that we are all gradually moved from the state of these "heedless children" to that of spiritually mature "adults", through the interaction of the Play itself and the profound, but initially "invisible", influence of the prophetic "Describers". To begin to penetrate this image, of course, one needs to recognise initially that the "Describers" mentioned here are all the messengers, prophets, saints and other divinely inspired guides; and that all the forms of this divine 'Imagination' – of the "audience" and the drama alike – are simultaneously parts of this single, unique *Commedia*, both "before" and "behind" the screen of our spatio-temporal separation...

Ibn 'Arabi's potent image of this universal 'divine comedy' immediately suggests ... the particular role of his own writings. For within that perspective, every human being already brings the capacities and depths of their spirit. And – given enough time – most human beings will eventually participate in and witness enough of this Play to begin to realise for themselves the deeper meanings, directions and guidance already, and repeatedly, indicated by each of the inspired "Describers". These are the most obviously indispensable elements of the process of realisation.

So against that backdrop, it is clear that Ibn 'Arabi's own writings are intended essentially as a kind of spiritual "catalyst" or actively illuminating agent whose role is to help his readers to apply the directive guidance of the Describers (with their scriptural and prophetic "Books") in the proper way. In other words, they are meant to help us to make the indispensable "revelatory" connections between our own particular experiences or "trials" – the infinite divine "Signs" "in their souls and on the horizons" (Qur'an 41:53) that constitute this Play – and the particular deeper lessons potentially illustrated by each of those potentially "theophanic" experiences. One of the significant terms Ibn 'Arabi himself most frequently uses for that ongoing mediating spiritual function is that of "Translator" (*tarjumān*).

And indeed the decisive evidence of the genuinely effective use of his work is whenever Ibn 'Arabi's words actually do help bring about one of these actually illuminating "openings" (*futūḥāt*) which provide the title, the inspiration, and the ongoing subject of this immense work (i.e. the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*). That unmistakable "opening" effect is beautifully described at the very beginning of his Introduction, 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 is no other

way: for the heart is not gladdened except by what it knows for sure to be real (*ḥaqq*). And the intellect cannot enter in here, because this knowledge (of spiritual intuition or "tasting") is not within its grasp. ...

*Ibn 'Arabi suggests that we are all gradually moved from the state of these "heedless children" to that of spiritually mature "adults", through the interaction of the Play itself*



The entry into purgatory, from William Blake's illustrations for Dante's *Divina Commedia*. It is now known that Dante derived his symbolism of the ascent through the different degrees of hell, purgatory and paradise from Islamic sources.

The full text of the lectures will be published in French later this year, and a first draft version in English is available on the MIAS website ([www.ibnarabisociety.org/lectures/](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/lectures/)).