

Freedoms and responsibilities: Ibn 'Arabī and the political dimensions of spiritual realisation

. Pt. 2

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Freedoms and Responsibilities: Ibn 'Arabī and the Political Dimensions of Spiritual Realisation [Part Two]

III. "SEEING WITH BOTH EYES": THE WIDER CIRCLES OF RESPONSIBILITY

Recognising the larger unifying political themes and intentions that pervade all of Ibn 'Arabī's writing is difficult for several reasons. Most important, certainly, is the long-established association of his work and teachings in the centuries following his death—both by its defenders and by many polemical critics—with historically later institutions and forms of "Sufism" and popular religious and devotional life. There are indeed important and valid reasons for that later historical association, which we will return to briefly in our conclusion. But here it is sufficient simply to place the *Futūḥāt* side-by-side with Rumi's near-contemporary and at least equally influential and encyclopedic *Spiritual Masnavī*, for example, in order to recognise quite clearly and unmistakably the radically different rhetoric, audiences, and characteristic interpretive approaches of the Shaykh's work that have just been briefly outlined in Part One. Such a comparison also dramatically highlights the peculiar *intentional difficulty* and (at first encounter) almost perversely complex literary structures and assumptions of the majority of Ibn 'Arabī's writings, which seem in many cases forthrightly designed to put off all but the most highly motivated "inside" readers²⁴—and which we know occasionally mystified even his own long-time disciples!

A second, equally understandable factor in obscuring these unifying political concerns is the fact that learned scholarly interpreters of Ibn 'Arabī's writings—in the past at least as much as today—have almost exclusively tended to focus on a relatively limited set of issues, topics, or approaches dictated by the problematic intersection between the Shaykh's own texts and the distinctive concerns of particular intellectual disciplines, familiar to some later interpreters, clearly included among those listed outside the circumference of our opening diagram (in Part One).²⁵ Even a cursory glance at past commentaries or most modern studies of Ibn 'Arabī beautifully illustrates that familiar interpretive process, which at best tends to arrive at an intellectually coherent image of the Shaykh's purported "doctrine" or "system" profoundly rooted in each particular interpreter's own assumptions and intellectual preoccupations.

Now one more cohesive and practically accessible approach to rediscovering and actually recognising these unifying political intentions is to begin directly with our own easily replicable experience of the wider *practical pre-conditions*—simultaneously appearing

both as necessary freedoms and as the most basic human spiritual obligations and responsibilities—that naturally arise, in every historical setting, simply through the very process of spiritual realisation itself. This approach, which is especially helpful for students with only a very limited acquaintance with Ibn 'Arabī's writings and the many unfamiliar intellectual disciplines he addresses, is the starting point of the following section (IV).

Here, though, we may begin by mentioning three typical illustrations of this wider rhetorical approach, focusing on recurrent practical and methodological differences that are likely to be familiar in each case to serious readers of the Shaykh today, even to those limited to the increasing body of English or French-language studies and translations. In each instance, when we look more closely, we can see how Ibn 'Arabī's distinctive rhetoric allows him to communicate in very different, but equally necessary and beneficial, ways to different audiences situated "outside" and "inside" the circle of spiritual realisation. For his own spiritual colleagues and collaborators *inside* that circle, his abstract theological and metaphysical discussions are clearly intended to heighten and inform their nascent awareness that the ultimate perfection (*kamāl*) of human responsibility always involves the rare mature ability to see the human situation, as his later interpreters put it, "with both eyes"—and hence to act creatively through all the appropriate means, following the Prophetic example, to further the enlightened awareness of "things as they really are".²⁶

On the other hand, for those learned readers approaching his work from the limited perspective of their inherited ambient beliefs and suppositions, unaware of their spiritual ignorance, each of these characteristic methodological discussions has two distinct aims and possible outcomes. On one level, Ibn 'Arabī's words normally constitute a dramatic, multi-faceted *invitation* to move beyond the restrictions of belief and misleadingly circumscribed "thinking" (*fikr*, or *'aql* in its restrictive sense)—an invitation that calls into question the epistemological limits of those intellectually restricted standpoints, while simultaneously suggesting possible alternative pathways of spiritual realisation. Less ambitiously, but politically no less significant, Ibn 'Arabī's elaborately careful theological and methodological discussions tend to help defuse an all too familiar set of stock accusations and stereotyped criticisms—some far more practically threatening than others—that religious intellectuals in Islam, as in every civilisation, repeatedly tend to apply to the locally pertinent claims and practices of spiritual realisation. Those targeted misunderstandings include, for example, standard fears of supposed anarchy, messianism, revolutionary chiliasm, quietism, antinomianism, dualism, idolatry, and so on. Of course the actual prevention and avoidance

of such pitfalls and dangers, whether individual or collective, is a basic practical function of spiritual guides and teachers in all religious traditions (in Islam and elsewhere), and such concerns are therefore frequently dealt with throughout the literature of Sufism in every period. But Ibn 'Arabī's learned discussion of these issues is aimed at a different, more scholarly audience, and is thereby intended to limit and overcome those official fears and misunderstandings which inevitably tend to conflict with spiritually active movements in any political and cultural setting.

THEOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS: THE UNIVERSALITY OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

One of the central preoccupations of Ibn 'Arabī's interpreters, past and present, has been his recurrent concern with highlighting—both in the literal symbolic terms of Islamic scripture and in more abstract theological and metaphysical language—the absolute universality of each of the key dimensions or elements of the spiritual life. Indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere, his all-inclusive approaches in that area were so persuasive and comprehensive that they subsequently inspired the most influential Muslim "official theologies" throughout key multi-religious, multi-cultural regions of the Muslim world during the centuries of extraordinary spiritual creativity and expansion following his death; while over the past century they have played an equally influential role in developing the conceptual frameworks of the modern study of religion.²⁷ However, the very familiarity of this central dimension of universality in the Shaykh's writing—even before its philosophical elaboration by the commentators of the *Fusūs al-Hikam*—sometimes tends to blind us to the obvious fact that those actively practicing the spiritual life do not necessarily even need such reminders. To recall that fundamental "hadith of the Questioning" with which we began this essay, the real-life situations of spiritual testing and learning are universally present and compelling in their own right, standing immediately before us in every situation.

Here again, Ibn 'Arabī's highly intellectualised, abstract expressions of this unifying theme in its different theological and metaphysical contexts are addressed above all to intellectuals (self-styled '*ulamā*' of one discipline or another) who might at least be persuaded by his arguments to tolerate—or perhaps even to begin to investigate and explore for themselves—unfamiliar spiritual phenomena and claims that they might otherwise negate or, given the necessary political influence, even suppress out of hand. On the other hand, for those more consciously practising their spiritual life within the circle of realisation, the abstract philosophical or theological discussions of this theme are just the tip of the iceberg. For those audiences, what lends such hermeneutical discussions their life and truly lasting

appeal is the actual experiential "phenomenology of spiritual life" scattered so memorably throughout Ibn 'Arabī's writings, and pre-eminently in his *Futūhāt*. In that respect, Ibn 'Arabī's work provides a vast phenomenological panorama of the full spectrum, prospects and potential forms of spiritual realisation that certainly has no equivalent in Islamic religious literature. From within the circle of spiritual realisation, then, the message conveyed by precisely this same language of universality is a radically different one indeed: here it highlights the practical human centrality of humility, self-knowledge (in the sense of the growing awareness of one's creaturely limits and corresponding total dependency on God), surrender, and spiritually effective openness in every dimension of one's life—a realisation epitomised in Ibn 'Arabī's repeated evocation of the Prophet's telling prayer: "O my Lord, increase me in knowing!".

THE LIMITS OF PHYSICAL OBSERVATION AND LOGICAL DEMONSTRATION

Another, almost equally recurrent (and indeed closely related) hermeneutical theme in Ibn 'Arabī's writing—again familiar from a number of arguments in the *Fusūs*, but highlighted even more strongly in the Shaykh's Introduction (*muqaddima*) to his *Futūhāt*—is his emphasis on the intrinsic *limitations* of unilluminated human "rationalising": i.e., *'aql*, in its etymologically restrictive sense, which he usually highlights whenever he is using that key Arabic term in this particular way. Our individual "ratiocination" in that limited sense, he insists, is already inadequate to understand more than a few of the actual meanings of the revealed scriptural symbols, and its inherent inadequacies are even more obvious in the Aristotelian philosophers' unfounded reliance on their proven methods of logic and rational demonstration once they have moved beyond the outwardly observable phenomena of the physical universe.²⁸ Indeed there are a number of well-known extended passages and sometimes comic personal anecdotes, directly evoking Ibn 'Arabī's own encounters with such adherents of *falsafa*, scattered throughout the *Futūhāt*—perhaps most dramatically in the elaborate contrast between the very different ascensions of the intellectual (Avicennan philosopher) and the spiritual knower/seeker in his famous chapter 167, on the "Alchemy of True Happiness".²⁹

Again, these recurrent methodological and epistemological cautions are clearly meant to be taken very differently from outside and inside the circle of spiritual realisation. For those learned audiences whose very lives and disciplines are entirely caught up in this kind of inherently restrictive intellectualising, of course, Ibn 'Arabī's remarks are at least a provocative and cautionary reminder of the unexamined assumptions and possible limitations

of their own perspectives. As such, they are also an "invitation to dance" inside the circle of spiritual realization, to discover significant realities lying beyond the limitations of those disciplines and approaches—or again, to enter into a new kind of spiritual dialogue whose results and premises, much less its ultimate outcome, are as yet unknown. For Ibn 'Arabī's considerable familiarity with the language and outlook of those religio-intellectual disciplines is a powerful indication that he is anything but an ignorant "irrationalist" or inspired "enthusiast", devoid of any serious interest in wider understanding and communication—a portrait which is of course the intellectual's standard pejorative stereotype of mystics throughout many religious traditions.

For Ibn 'Arabī's colleagues and active companions (*ashāb*, *qawm*, *tā'ifa*) in the individual hermeneutical process of actual spiritual realisation, of course, these passages in which he highlights the inherent limitations of ratiocination, far from marking some "end" of the active role of reason and intellectual reflection, are instead meant to point to the truly endless tasks of *spiritual intelligence* or wise discernment (*hikma*) at every stage of the process of realization.³⁰ Indeed the very goal of that process, as he constantly reiterates, is active existential conformity (*'ubūdiyya*) to the knowable aspect of the divine, to that "First Intellect" (*'aql*) which is Itself the all-encompassing "Muhammadan Reality" and common Ground of each of the prophets and divine messengers.

THE TENSION OF SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL "ETHICS": DISCOVERING NON-DUALISM

In one very peculiar sense, theologians and other public moralists standing "outside" the circle of spiritual realisation—whatever the particular religion or polity in question—are always right in their perennial suspicion of "what must be going on" inside that dangerously unknown territory.³¹ For two of the most fundamental requisites of spiritual growth and discernment, the most basic tickets for consciously entering this circle of realisation, are the admission of one's profound ignorance (in so many different domains), and the dawning recognition that the most important and lasting spiritual lessons are those we learn precisely from our own unveiled mistakes and inadequacies. In most spiritual literatures, whatever the tradition in question, these "politically incorrect" basic facts of life are only rarely or quietly mentioned, despite their indispensable pedagogical role in actual practice and in even the most basic development of self-awareness.

Now whether we find ourselves outside or inside this circle, the initial inchoate awareness of those unnameable fears and dangers lying beneath that usually unacknowledged spiritual ignorance typically gives rise to the recurrent psychic reactions of *dualism* (good vs.

"evil") and *projection* (the "other" as purely evil), together with the reification of both those extremes and unacknowledged idolatry (or in Qur'anic terms, spiritual "hypocrisy") that such familiar reactions always entail. Indeed this is so much the case that much of what we normally call "history" is little more than the endlessly repeated catalogue of the collective manifestations of those same recurrent reactions. In dramatic contrast, the entire process of spiritual growth and realisation—at least at the preliminary levels that normally concern most of us—is largely devoted to exploring and learning to recognise, process, contextualise and integrate those unavoidable initial reactions, in increasingly challenging and probing ways. In addition, this is a domain in which each individual's gradual individual discovery of *spiritual* ethics—based on the ever-expanding demands and obligations of real inspired knowing (*ma'rifa*, or *'ilm* in its actual Qur'anic sense)—necessarily comes into conflict in various ways with the previously unconscious, socially, culturally and politically conditioned, belief-based systems of "social ethics" necessary to the smooth functioning of any complex human collectivity.³² Some of the most dramatic illustrations of that particular recurrent type of human conflict, for Ibn 'Arabī and his original audiences, are of course to be found in the archetypal stories and spiritual biographies embedded in the hadith, *sīra*, and companion literatures, as well as the familiar tales of earlier prophets.³³

This is a central area of Ibn 'Arabī's writing and teaching in which the practical phenomenology of spiritual life is intimately connected to the most abstract theological and metaphysical considerations, especially those famous controversies that later arose in the centuries-long polemics surrounding the "Unicity of being" and the necessarily paradoxical expressions of non-dualism. What Ibn 'Arabī is trying to accomplish in these elaborate metaphysical and cosmological discussions (often centring on the mysterious divine "Names" of the Qur'an), which are scattered throughout his *Futūḥāt*, is clearly directed above all to a very narrow, highly learned theologico-philosophical audience. But we must keep in mind that it is precisely that learned audience of religious scholars who—in their recurrent public role as politico-theological authorities and officially sanctioned "interpreters" of the revelation—were (and still are) constantly called upon to ratify and legitimise all the destructive collective manifestations of those mass expressions of dualism, projection, reification and self-aggrandising idolatry whose actual worldly effects are never far from our view.

Against that exceedingly practical human backdrop, Ibn 'Arabī's characteristic elaborately developed distinctions of hierarchal or progressive "stages", "dimensions", and

"levels"—familiar features (always reflecting the pregnant subtleties of the Qur'anic text) both in his cosmology and metaphysics, and in his even more complex spiritual phenomenology—are far from mere arbitrary systematising; and they certainly have nothing to do with some inexplicable mania for classification. For if we take them seriously, as his readers are certainly meant to do, we begin to discover that each of those hierarchical distinctions eventually corresponds—again, within the living circle of individual spiritual realisation—to actual realities and experienced phenomena that tend to reveal themselves, not so surprisingly, once we actually take the trouble to look.³⁴ Equally important in this context of warring dualisms, reification, idolatry, and self-deluding *makar* (unconsciously manipulative pretence), of course, are such familiar and better-studied rhetorical features of Ibn 'Arabī's writing as his reliance on paradox, irony (of endless sorts), terminological multiplicity and innovation, and the pointed etymological "deconstruction" of key Arabic terms and Qur'anic symbols—all familiar rhetorical efforts clearly intended, within the hermeneutical circle of realisation, to open the way to the truly revelatory discovery of those textual divine "Signs" (*āyāt*, as Qur'anic verses) at last *as* genuinely theophanic Signs.

Once one has begun to grasp the manifold intentions of those characteristic rhetorical devices, what emerges above all—especially in contrast with the far less ambitious devotional and pietistic literatures otherwise commonly associated with popular Sufism—is the extraordinary efforts this Shaykh goes to in order to unveil, for even his most recalcitrant learned readers, the inherently *dynamic* and open-ended nature of every soul's innate process of spiritual discovery.

IV. "DANCING IN BOTH WORLDS": CONDITIONS FOR SPIRITUAL REALISATION

No doubt the easiest way to come to recognise the larger unifying political intentions scattered throughout the constantly shifting discussions and topics of the *Futūḥāt*, rather than starting with each of those particular passages in itself, is to begin instead with our own experience of those familiar responses, prospects and challenges that tend to arise whenever we are actively engaged in the processes of spiritual learning and discovery. In other words, to examine our own unique creative responses to that perennial hermeneutical question raised by Ibn 'Arabī (and by the hadith of the Questioning), with which we opened this study. If we keep those particular personal discoveries and unveilings clearly in mind, then we will immediately recognise—just as the Shaykh intended—the full relevance of each of the corresponding discussions and pertinent insights that come to our attention as we gradually move through his own unique spiritual "Openings" in the *Futūḥāt*.

If we return to our own memorable experiences of that powerful "hadith of the Questioning" introduced in Part One, the first thing we typically discover—besides, or just after, our initial recall of those rare and usually unforgettable moments when we were either the agent or (as is perhaps more common) the unexpected recipient of one of those miraculously unexpected human manifestations of the divine Loving Compassion (*rahma*)—is the paradoxical recognition of two equally powerful realities. First, there is our extraordinary, often outwardly inexplicable ability to intuit the actual suffering and inner disturbance (if not its outward "cause" or occasion) of even total strangers we may encounter. And secondly, there is the familiar host of paralysing, equally inexplicable fears and reticences (usually with an added layer of noisy intellectual obfuscation) that ordinarily keep us from actually acting upon and responding to our mysteriously compelling awareness of those painful needs in others.

The next and considerably more subtle stage of realisation, usually arising after extended experience and reflection on this challenging situation, involves the gradually dawning awareness of the real depth of pain and loss that we are actually experiencing (however deeply we may repress it) *whenever we fail to act* on our spiritual intuition—indeed whenever we see and experience others, as well, egregiously failing to respond that depth of suffering in ourselves and others. And that painfully awakening realisation is usually followed rather quickly by the further intimation that our own previous experiences of suffering and needfulness, within this perennial earthly situation, do somehow mysteriously inform and help to account for the relative depth and acuity of our own growing capacity for actualised compassion. At that stage, perhaps, we also become ready to appreciate what Ibn 'Arabī reports—as the culminating spiritual testament of Idrīs—about the "Fire" of life in this world as the purifying crucible of spiritual perfection (*kamāl*) that eventually reveals the "gold and silver" of each purified fully human spirit and its unique good-and-beautiful actions (*ihsān*).³⁵

But how can we move beyond—or rather, through—this perennial challenge? Without yet referring directly to Ibn 'Arabī (since virtually everything he wrote can be construed as a part of his own practical reply to that question), there are certain basic practical responses, or at the very least preconditions for further discovery, that seem to arise in a natural, inevitable manner at this stage of realisation. And each of those practical responses, while it is certainly experienced as an inherently compelling spiritual obligation and responsibility, can also be expressed as a kind of *essential freedom*—a freedom that is

necessary, in any case, if that human responsibility is to be actualised in wider circles of realisation. From yet another perspective, each of these conditions is also a practical prerequisite for the effective exercise (and indeed the very discovery) of the pre-eminent spiritual virtue of *ihsān*: i.e., for first recognising and then accomplishing in each circumstance what truly *is* both good and beautiful. In the following list, no particular order or ranking is intended, since each of these practical elements seems equally essential; indeed it is virtually impossible to separate them within the actual exercise of *ihsān*. The necessarily brief references here to related themes in the *Futūhāt* are more fully illustrated in our earlier preliminary studies of Ibn 'Arabī's approach to the problems of religious "law" and spiritual authority.³⁶

THE FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO QUESTION AND LEARN: ENABLING "SPIRITUAL LITERACY"

Ibn 'Arabī's beautiful formulation of the all-encompassing dilemma of spiritual hermeneutics with which we began was, not surprisingly, itself an open *question*. For every step of real spiritual growth begins with a question: with an open-ended intention or aspiration whose ultimate aim, by its very nature, always remains "not yet" known, and at best only vaguely intimated. So when we add to the initial natural spiritual testing situation of those ever-renewed divine Signs "*in our own souls and in the world*" (Qur'an 41:53) the additional transforming catalyst of the revealed scriptural "Signs" (*āyāt*) and Prophetic indications, it quickly becomes apparent that the proper individual application and appreciation of those bare scriptural elements understandably requires a whole host of complex enabling conditions.

While we tend to take the providential presence of many of those practical conditions for granted, not much reflection is required to begin to appreciate and outline the different essential elements of that mature "spiritual literacy"—far more demanding than linguistic literacy, and even more difficult to acquire—which we need in order to move successfully through the successive stages of spiritual realisation. We can better appreciate the remarkable historical challenges and creative achievements involved in satisfying these conditions simply by studying even briefly the extraordinarily mysterious processes by which the great spiritual works and institutions of the past actually came into being. But that same historical study constantly reminds us just as forcefully how every age and every individual is obliged to create anew the appropriate means for the new spiritual challenges facing each generation. The provision and fulfilment of these conditions are perennial human

responsibilities that Ibn 'Arabī mentions and highlights for his readers in many different ways.

As the Shaykh constantly points out throughout the *Futūhāt*—and just as consistently, if sometimes less obviously, in all his other works—there is no human spiritual responsibility or obligation (*taklīf*) which is somehow free from the genuine exercise of our most distinctively human spiritual quality of free will and reasoned choice (*irāda*). So even though life "outside the circle" of realisation necessarily relies, in every human society, on its own specific forms of largely unconscious social consensus, agreement, and "belief (a common Arabic word which, quite tellingly, does not occur even a single time in the Qur'an), Ibn 'Arabī's writing can be seen, from this perspective, as one never-ceasing reminder that our movement into the circle and process of realisation, our gradual active assumption of our true human dignity (as *insān*, and not the conditioned-animal *bashar*), always begins with the discovery and exercise of our inalienable obligation to learn and discover the truly divine Self-revealing. For that transforming discovery necessarily precedes any effective transcendence of the dependencies of our ambient socio-cultural conditioning (*taqlīd*).

THE FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO CREATE, INNOVATE, EXPERIMENT: EXPANDING DIVERSITY

One of the most ironically delightful surprises one encounters again and again in the *Futūhāt*—given the familiar contrasting keynote of today's Islamist political ideologies—is Ibn 'Arabī's frequent return to illustrate, in different contexts, the central practical spiritual importance of the famous hadith in which the Prophet lavishly praises the lasting, ever-multiplying spiritual rewards of "good-and-beautiful innovation" (*bid'a hasana*) in the spiritual path.³⁷ Underlying this fundamental spiritual necessity and obligation, of course, are two even more fundamental themes in the Shaykh's thought: his insistence (following many Qur'anic verses to that effect) on the providential, absolutely *irreducible diversity* of individual human natures and communities (30:22); and his characteristic emphasis, already elaborated above, on the *inherently dynamic*, continually unfolding nature of each human being's spiritual development—and on the correspondingly inexhaustible divine Creativity underlying that central human spiritual responsibility.

Moreover, these points are not something Ibn 'Arabī piously preaches simply in words, but teachings that he dramatically illustrate with literally hundreds of fascinating "case-studies", in his telling accounts of both contemporary and earlier spiritual figures, including individuals with whose practical approaches and arguments he quite openly disagrees—yet with whom, in many cases, he seems to have happily lived, worked and

taught. For example, his well-known critical attitude toward the widespread spiritual practice of musical *samā'* is only one illustration of this revealing co-existence of his own strong personal judgments together with an evident practical tolerance of opposing perspectives and interpretations.

Another recurrent expression of this same recognition of the spiritual necessity and inevitability of constant creativity—and the concomitant result of ever-expanding individual, social and cultural diversity and individuation—is his often forceful pronouncements, in various outwardly "legal" contexts (and again reflecting repeated explicit Qur'anic warnings to the same effect), radically questioning the ability or right of anyone to seek to *impose* the results of their own hermeneutical reasoning and spiritual discoveries on anyone else.³⁸ Equally revealing are his even more outspoken criticisms of many of the most basic assumptions and pretensions of the historical disciplines of *fiqh* and *usūl al-fiqh*, when those arbitrary assumptions are construed as the basis for some purportedly all-encompassing system of public religious "laws".³⁹ One key implication of these pointedly radical judgements, which he returns to even more frequently, is his sympathetic embrace of the open-ended, infinite profusion of individual modes of "belief".⁴⁰

At an even deeper level, of course—as with Ibn 'Arabī's highly distinctive personal notions of the timeless "individual archetypes" (*a'yān thābita*) of each person's existence, and of each human soul's "direct line" to God (*al-wajh al-khāss*)—this awareness of truly absolute individuality and spiritual diversity goes to the very heart of the Shaykh's distinctive conception of the divine Reality and Its infinite Self-manifestations. But here, as everywhere else, those famous metaphysical theories have their roots and illustrations profoundly anchored in the spectrum of spiritual realities and probative experiences always accompanying the ongoing practical processes of realisation and discovery, of revelatory "finding" and "unveiling" (*wujūd* and *kashf*).

THE FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO "MAKE BEAUTIFUL" (*ihsān*):

While Truth (*al-Haqq*), rather than Beauty (and the inseparable reality of love), is surely the overall keynote of Ibn 'Arabī's best-known writings—at least when they are compared with the classical poetic masterworks of the later Persian, Turkish, Urdu and other Eastern Islamic humanities—his books are also filled with practical acknowledgements of the essential role of these other indispensable elements of the spiritual Path. And in a number of places (such as his famous chapter 178 on Love in the *Futūhāt*), he provides what is essentially the template for many centuries of later commentaries, which we find in all

Islamicate languages, that are meant to bring out more openly and explicitly the originally scriptural elements and Prophetic lessons so effectively conveyed in the popularly accessible local forms of the Islamic humanities, from the devotional classics like al-Busīrī's *Burda* to the great mystical poems of Ibn al-Fārid—and their even more celebrated equivalents in other non-Arabic cultural and linguistic contexts.

We have separated this point out here as a distinctive pre-condition for the actual hermeneutical processes of spiritual realisation simply because the prevailing religio-political ideologies of our own time have so puzzlingly pretended to divorce the obligation of *ihsān* (understood simply as "doing good") from those even more essential components of divine Beauty and the motivating power of love which are so inseparable from the actual spiritual reality of *ihsān*. Hence we find ourselves all too often facing the strange dilemmas of a multitude of contemporary societies and cultures in which human beings, given their innate spiritual "hungers" and "thirsts", naturally gravitate toward the realities of Beauty and the endless creative expressions of *ihsān* whenever they have the requisite freedom—yet where those principal divine realities are paradoxically assumed by religio-moralistic ideologues (of virtually every stripe) to be somehow excluded from those fantasised impersonal, ideal systems of monolithic public "morality" that they arbitrarily portray as being somehow imposed from without or above.

THE FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO ASSOCIATE AND COMMUNICATE:

If each person's first conscious steps on the spiritual Path are necessarily "individual" (or rather, happen to appear as such), certainly all the remaining advances are often taken in many indispensable kinds of "spiritual companionship" (*suhba* and *walāya*), whose transforming presences and indispensable influences are described and illustrated on virtually every page of Ibn 'Arabī's *Meccan Illuminations*. So whenever we are able to respond positively and appropriately to those uniquely individual spiritual challenges emblematically portrayed in the hadith of the Questioning, that actual movement toward realised compassion (*rahma*) and *ihsān* is almost inevitably with and through the influence, encouragement, and grace of spiritual companions and guides, present on many levels of being, whose roles and full influence become ever more visible and palpable as we advance. Once again, this is a basic phenomenological reality of all spiritual life whose scriptural, practical, and intellectual dimensions are elaborately described throughout Ibn 'Arabī's writings.

Moreover, some of the most remarkable and thought-provoking lessons of Ibn 'Arabī's works—emerging most clearly in scattered autobiographical remarks about himself

and his Sufi companions and other spiritual contemporaries—have to do not with his formal doctrinal teachings, but with the peculiarities of certain social and cultural conditions he evidently takes for granted, and which he specifically chose to highlight in his *Rūh al-Quds* (partly translated as "*Sufis of Andalusia*") and other autobiographical works. What is so striking in those personal accounts, almost everywhere that Ibn 'Arabī travels, is his remarkable encounters with an extraordinary set of spiritually accomplished individuals (with or without visible charismatic powers, or *karāmāt*) who are themselves distinguished by their tell-tale signs of accomplished "spiritual *ijtihād*" their surprisingly creative endeavours of experimentation and realisation that are often radically different in both kind and expression from the formulaic institutional accounts and classical guidelines of proper *adab* available in the classical Sufi manuals. As we can see throughout his writings, Ibn 'Arabī forcefully criticises those recently developed eastern "Sufi" institutions and formulaic approaches on many occasions precisely for their routinisation (and elitist specialisation) of intrinsically *universal* spiritual tasks and responsibilities which he always insists are actually incumbent on all human beings (and certainly on all Muslims), not just a handful of self-styled initiates.

On an even more visible, indeed inherently political level, when we consider those ever-present testing situations posed by our opening hadith of the Questioning, it is clearly close to impossible even to recognise the full extent of the sufferings and needs of those around us—all the endless individual forms of inner "sickness", "hunger" and "thirst" compressed in the succinctly forceful imagery of that unforgettable hadith—whenever those same individuals are not *free and empowered to communicate openly and effectively the actual realities of their state*. Hence any truly effective response to that fundamental human right and responsibility of genuinely free communication also necessarily requires a corresponding *freedom of association and collective action*, a right which is typically most directly efficacious (outwardly as well as spiritually) when it is closest to the particular needs and suffering that are in question.⁴¹

RESPECTING THE *AWLIYĀ*:

No theme is more central to the *Meccan Illuminations* than that of *walāya* (of the divine "Proximity" and "Guardianship"), in all of its dimensions and manifestations. This includes by extension the vast domain of prophetology, and the wide-ranging practical spiritual functions, in Ibn 'Arabī's world-view, of that rare group of "the Friends of God" (the mysterious *qawm* described at 5:54) who are always at the centre of his concern: that specially missioned "group whom (God) *will* bring" in these later times, "who love Him, and

He loves them...". So far, even the brilliantly summarised presentations and typologies of M. Chodkiewicz' classic *Seal of the Saints* (or the traditional commentaries now available discussing this same issue as it arises throughout the *Fusūs*) do no more than scratch the surface of this immense and all-encompassing topic.

This is perhaps the perfect illustration of a subject in Ibn 'Arabī which appears initially as abstractly theological (and at least implicitly political) when viewed intellectually, from the "outside" of our hermeneutical circle. But when we approach it from the more illuminating perspective of actual spiritual practice and realisation, in a very real sense virtually everything (and certainly everyone) one encounters on the Path comes down to the probative manifestations and reassurances of the divine *walāya*. For no one advances very far in the process of spiritual realisation—or discovers any lastingly satisfying answers to that fundamental hermeneutical question with which we began this essay—without the tangible guiding presence of the "Friends of God". And each step, after that initial discovery, is accompanied by the ever-growing awareness of their influences and guidance on every plane of our being—and of their presence all around us, as so many of these "Openings" (and the hadith of the Questioning) constantly remind us, for "those with eyes to see...".

In that light, the virtual absence of their mention—and indeed the not infrequent attitude of vehement denigration and even outright denial (extending even to the point of bombings and other sacrilege)—among the publicly prevailing pseudo-religious ideologies of our own day is one dramatic measure of the particular concrete challenges facing the "people of realisation" in this era. Even—or perhaps especially?—small children can immediately recognise the transforming presence of each human and angelic instrument of divine compassion that they encounter—an intuitive spiritual awareness, like that of holy and sacred places, which is built into the very essence of the human heart. So few teachings of Ibn 'Arabī could be more widely neglected, yet more poignantly indispensable, in the distracted public circumstances in which we find ourselves today.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL NECESSITY OF CONSENSUS AND CO-OPERATION

What this particular heading points to is not those familiar types of spontaneous, small-group spiritual association just mentioned, which develop directly and spontaneously from our natural response to those individual situations of suffering and need dramatised in the opening hadith of the Questioning. Instead, I am referring here to a far more visible, essentially political reality lying "outside" the circle of specifically spiritual concerns, a creative political challenge which is daily re-enacted at levels stretching from the couple and

family, at one extreme, to the most inclusive global moral communities. Ibn 'Arabī was no unrealistic "utopian" (in the ordinary sense of that term), but a keen observer of the visible surrounding political realities in a time of widespread turbulence and traumatic disorder so extreme that we can scarcely imagine it—caught as he was, throughout his life, between resurgent Crusades of both West and East, and the even more devastating Mongol invasions already underway to his East. As such, he devotes considerable attention throughout the *Futūhāt* and elsewhere to dealing with the inevitably fraught and problematic relations between those rare individuals whose existence is conscientiously devoted to spiritual matters lying "within" the circle of realisation, and that much larger portion of humanity who, on the level of their conscious attention and intention, are ordinarily so deeply embedded in the manifold forms of unconscious *taqlīd* and reflexive natural behaviour that they may well imagine they are living solely in that "lowest life" (*al-hayāt al-dunyā*) lying entirely outside the circle of realisation.

In that light, another unfairly neglected subject scattered throughout the *Futūhāt* is Ibn 'Arabī's careful attention to those basic matters of common worldly interest (*masālih*) and corresponding shared principles of practical wisdom and prudence (*hikam*, here in a more worldly sense) which necessarily underlie every lasting and successful form of public worldly order—again, at every level of human association.⁴² Unfortunately, since Ibn 'Arabī often contrasts that shared domain of earthly practical wisdom with the dramatically more inclusive and far-reaching spiritual aims of the divine revelations (*sharā'i*), it is clear that some modern interpreters have occasionally misunderstood such contrasting passages as a kind of—typically "ascetic", or dangerously "mystical"—denigration or even an outright denial of the ongoing importance of such worldly considerations and of the complex forms of public consensus and compromise that underpin any stable socio-political order.

In fact, given the radical individuality and expanding creative diversity that Ibn 'Arabī views as inevitably arising from the active pursuit of spiritual realisation, he repeatedly makes it clear—as is indeed evident in all his above-mentioned rhetorical forms of careful attention to the organising opinions and influences of that socio-cultural world "outside the circle"—that only a constant, widely shared public spirit of compromise, consensus, and appropriate concern with those central matters of public interest (*masālih*) can make possible *in practice* each of these preceding essential supportive conditions for the tasks and obligations of spiritual realisation. In this respect, once again, Ibn 'Arabī's far-reaching political insights continue to highlight these essential perennial conditions for spiritual

realisation and creativity in the ever-expanding, inherently diverse, multi-cultural and multi-confessional political and moral orders of the contemporary world—just as they already did in the far more fragmented, scattered, localised, and highly unstable historical circumstances of the tumultuous centuries immediately following his death.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to an extraordinary amount of detailed historical and textual research over the past few decades, we can now follow in considerable detail during the centuries following Ibn 'Arabī's death, throughout the regions north and east of the original Arab conquests, many beautifully illustrative cases of those extraordinary local processes of spiritual and religious creativity—of *ihsān* in the most profound and lasting sense—underlying those forms of the Islamic humanities that in turn eventually made possible the emergence of Islam as a truly world religious tradition.⁴³ (In our own time, incidentally, the same creative spiritual phenomena are still happening all around us, though of course more visibly for those who know where and how to look.) Against that inspiring backdrop, it is one of those curious historical ironies which one frequently encounters in the study of religion, that so many of the prevailing dualist religio-political ideologies of our own day have chosen to portray those remarkable centuries of cultural creativity and diversity, and that hemisphere-wide theatre of spiritual effervescence and religious expansion, as an age of supposed "decadence", inactivity, and decay.

As the result of that recent detailed historical research, we can now find the traces of Ibn 'Arabī's influence throughout that period, both visible (textual) and implicit, almost wherever we turn. And that influence is equally palpable in *both* the integral facets of his writing discussed in this paper. Most obviously, it can be seen "outside" the circle of realization, in the public, learned defence and theological articulation of his distinctive theses and understanding of the Islamic tradition, in ways which frequently dominated official religious circles, even in certain cases—as with Khumaynī's famous "*Letter to Gorbachev*"—down to our own day.⁴⁴ Less obviously demonstrable, but probably far more profound and lasting, was the actual spiritual interpretation and creative application of his intentions and insights by dedicated readers and students who actually put into practice, in the domains of realisation, all those lessons he sought to communicate to his spiritually prepared readers, those he addresses so tellingly at the end of his Introduction to the *Futūhāt*, who are able to move from allusion to insight, and from insight to its realised expression and communication.⁴⁵

That latter group of readers, who are not satisfied to "worship according to the prevailing suppositions" of others, are indeed most likely to seek out and put into practice these and many other dimensions of Ibn 'Arabī's own response to the recurrent dilemmas of spiritual hermeneutics and realisation. Some of the key features of the Shaykh's own deliberate response, carefully indicating how we may discover this mysterious, divinely intended "aspect of the Right/Truth/Obligation with God applying to *this* particular problematic situation", are beautifully summarised in the following later key passage from the *Futūhāt*.⁴⁶

Now you must know that if the fully human being (*al-insān*) renounces his (own personal) aims, takes a loathing to his carnal self (*nafs*), and instead prefers his Lord: then the Real (*al-Haqq*) will give him a form of divine guidance in exchange for the form of his carnal self, ...so that he walks in garments of Light. And (this form) *is* the revealed-pathway (*sharī'a*) of his prophet and the message of his messenger. Thus he receives from his Lord what contains his happiness. And some people see (this divine guidance) in the form of their prophet, while some see it in the form of their (spiritual) state.

In the former case, Ibn 'Arabī continues:

That (form) *is* the inner reality of that prophet and his spirit, or the form of an angel like him, who knows his revealed-pathway from God.... And we ourselves have often received in this way the form of many things among the divinely revealed judgments which we had not learned about from the learned or from their books. (For even) if the form (revealing that inspiration to the seeker) is not that of his prophet, then it still necessarily refers to his (particular spiritual) state or to the stage of the divine-revealing (*shar'*) with regard to *that* moment and *that* situation in which he saw that vision.

So nothing could be more universal, or more far-reaching in its practical implications and demands, than the Shaykh's summary conclusion here, his remarkable response to those recurrent dilemmas of scriptural interpretation and true authority with which we began—a response that immediately takes us back to each of those essential practical conditions for spiritual realisation discussed in the preceding sections:

... (For) apart from what is (unambiguously) forbidden or enjoined, there is no restriction on what he accepts from that (inspiration), whether with regard to

beliefs or other things: *for God's Presence encompasses the totality of al beliefs.*

²⁴ This quality is particularly obvious, of course, in the mysterious, often more openly autobiographical symbolic works, in both prose and poetry, dating from Ibn 'Arabī's younger period in the Maghreb (*K. al-Isrā'*, *'Anqā' Mughrib*, and so on), prior to his receiving his mission for more public dissemination of his teaching and acts of *nasīha* (n. 7 in Part One). To a great extent, those earlier symbolic writings have been decipherable only through careful comparison with a wide range of illuminating passages from his *Futūhāt* and other more didactic later compositions.

²⁵ This is particularly evident in the long—and extraordinarily influential—line of philosophico-theological commentaries on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fusūs al-Hikam*, focusing on the intersection of his teachings with prevailing philosophical (Avicennan) and theological (F. Rāzī, etc.) issues and conceptions, that was inaugurated by his son-in-law and close disciple, Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. See now the magisterial discussion of Qūnawī's own highly creative role in this process by Richard Todd, in his recent Oxford PhD thesis (*Writing in the Book of the World*), which hopefully will soon be more widely available in published form.

²⁶ Referring to a famous Prophetic prayer to which Ibn 'Arabī often alludes: "O my God, cause me to see things as they really are."

²⁷ In addition to the two articles cited at n. 19 in Part One, see also the forthcoming studies "Ibn 'Arabī in the 'Far West': Spiritual Influences and the Science of Spirituality," in *Journal of the History of Sufism*, V (2006) (special issue: proceedings of Kyoto Conference on Ibn 'Arabī's Influences in Asia, ed. Y. Tonaga); and "From Cordoba to Isfahan, and Beyond: Mulla Sadra, Ibn 'Arabī and the Emerging Science of Spirituality," to appear in *Proceedings of the Isfahan Conference on Islamic Philosophy* ("Cordoba and Isfahan: Two Schools of Islamic Philosophy"), ed. H. Landolt and M. Mohaghegh.

²⁸ See the detailed enumeration of important discussions of this theme, from throughout the *Futūhāt*, in the pioneering article of Franz Rosenthal, "Ibn 'Arabī Between 'Philosophy' and 'Mysticism,'" in *Oriens*, vol. 31 (1988), pp. 1-35. Many of the passages analysed by Prof. Rosenthal have to do particularly with the politico-legal implications of those contrasts Ibn 'Arabī repeatedly draws between the limitations of the individual intellect (*'aql*) and the deeper wisdom of divinely inspired revelation (*shar'*).

²⁹ It is surely no accident that Ibn 'Arabī actually begins his basic Introduction (*muqaddima*) to the entire *Futūhāt* with an elaborate epistemological discussion of the limitations and respective domains of the different human intellectual and spiritual faculties and capacities that are essential for understanding the remainder of that immense work. See the translation of key elements of that foundational section in "How to Study the *Futūhāt*: Ibn 'Arabī's Own Advice", pp. 73-89 in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī: 750th Anniversary Commemoration Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury, Element Books, 1993), along with the more extensive analysis of that passage and its relationship to the pertinent rhetorical forms of Ibn 'Arabī's writing in the article cited at n. 7 above ("Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and 'Translating' the *Meccan Illuminations*").

³⁰ See the development and illustrations of this central theme throughout *The Reflective Heart...* (n. 7 above).

³¹ In this respect, as in so many others, Plato's Socratic dialogues provide memorable illustrations of the most fundamental features of Ibn 'Arabī's thought and teaching, in closely parallel forms that are yet clearly not dependent on the same language or cultural traditions.

³² See the chapter on "The Mysteries of *Ihsān*: Natural Contemplation and the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur'an"—and the related study of the dramatisation of this contrast of spiritual and belief-based "ethics" in the Sura of Joseph (n. 12 in Part One above)—both included in the forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

³³ His famous *Fusūs al-Hikam*, of course, is devoted in large part to the careful rhetorical "deconstruction" and "re-revelation" of the dramatically revealing situations and spiritual meanings conveyed by many of those scriptural stories, whose originally intended spiritual implications are rapidly obscured, in every religious tradition, by the recurrent patina of familiarity and official respectability.

³⁴ Again, this constant interplay of "theoretical" and phenomenological concerns within the actual operative dimensions of spiritual realisation is illustrated in detail throughout the passages from the *Futūhāt* translated and discussed in *The Reflective Heart*.

³⁵ See the full translation of this key chapter 15 from the *Futūhāt* in the volume in preparation, *Elevations: Insight and Transformation in the "Meccan Illuminations"*, as well as the shorter excerpts included in the concluding Chapter 5 of *The Reflective Heart*.

³⁶ See especially the *Studia Islamica* article ("Ibn 'Arabī's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority") cited at n. 23 (Part One), as well as numerous related passages included in F. Rosenthal's study cited at n. 28 above. Each of the points briefly mentioned in this section is the subject of a full chapter in my book on Ibn 'Arabī's political thought now in preparation. See also the related discussions and translations from the *Futūhāt* summarised in E. Winkel, *Islam and the Living Law* (Karachi, Oxford U. Press, 1997).

³⁷ See the full references and more extensive illustrations in the studies in notes 36 and 23 above.

³⁸ Again, see the detailed illustrations of these key political principles, throughout the *Futūhāt*, in the earlier studies cited at n. 23 above.

³⁹ On this point, see especially the translation (and explanatory notes) of chapter 366 of the *Futūhāt* ("The Mahdī and His Helpers") in *The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I; chapter 2 ("Ibn 'Arabī and the Tasks of Spiritual Insight and Creativity") in *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation*; "Ibn 'Arabī's Messianic Secret: From 'The Mahdī' to the Imamate of Every Soul", *JMIAS*, vol. XXX (2001), pp. 1-19; and the legal studies cited notes 34 and 21 above.

⁴⁰ *I'tiqād*: a term that could be more adequately translated (especially in light of the Arabic etymological connotations of "restriction" and "binding" that Ibn 'Arabī is always quick to highlight) as "the spiritually determinative conscious and unconscious assumptions and perspectives informing our uniquely individual 'framing' of the nature of reality". See especially the concluding passage, from chapter 318 of the *Futūhāt*, translated at the end of this article.

⁴¹ Not surprisingly, then, Ibn 'Arabī's ongoing discussions of the spiritual themes of charity throughout the *Futūhāt*, both as *zakāt* and *sadaqa*, are among the most immediately accessible and spiritually powerful passages in that work.

⁴² See the pioneering article of F. Rosenthal (n. 28 in Part One) for an especially helpful enumeration of the key passages in which Ibn 'Arabī discusses these essential, humanly universal rational political principles, which also extend to the shared this-worldly aims that are also served by the divine revealed-pathways (*sharā'i*).

⁴³ For an initial overview of the increasingly prolific and geographically wide-ranging spectrum of recent historical research illustrating the local impact of these phenomena in very different historical settings, see the web-based volume (incorporating several dozen articles, monographs and reviews of related publications), *Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives* (details at n. 6 in Part One). One of the best measures of the vast geographical and historical extent of the subsequent use and application of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings is in the highly detailed regional case-studies of the polemics and opposition to those Akbari influences, in a range of local settings, included in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics*, ed. Frederic de Jong & Bernd Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999).

⁴⁴ See "*Except His Face...: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn 'Arabi's Legacy*", in *JMIAS*, XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13, and other references at n. 19 (Part One) above.

⁴⁵ See the translation of those key sections of his *muqaddima* in "How to Study the *Futūhāt*: Ibn 'Arabī's Own Advice" (n. 29 above). One recent, and historically particularly important, illustration of this kind of wide-ranging "unpublicised" influence of the Shaykh's thought within and through the arenas of actual spiritual realisation—and at the same time, of the carefully adapted cultural and political creativity highlighted throughout this essay—can be found in Richard McGregor's *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn 'Arabī* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2004), as well as in the author's other related studies in medieval Sufism.

⁴⁶ Chapter 318, vol. III, p. 70. The phrases placed in quotes in the preceding sentences here are drawn from those longer key passages on the challenge of true spiritual hermeneutics, in chapter 64 of the *Futūhāt*, translated at the beginning of this study (Part One above).