

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

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# Freedoms and Responsibilities

## Ibn ‘Arabī and the Political Dimensions of Spiritual Realisation

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### PART ONE

One of the more dubious popular stereotypes about “mystics” and spiritual teachings, whether in Islam or other religious traditions, is the notion that they are somehow peculiarly “other-worldly” and therefore essentially divorced from the inherent political demands and implications of our ordinary earthly existence. Whatever the justice of such a judgment with regard to other figures, the extraordinary, still ongoing history of vociferous public theological controversies surrounding Ibn ‘Arabī’s work and of heated polemical appeals for and against his writings and distinctive theses should quickly dispel such notions in his regard. Indeed the highly visible emergence in recent decades, throughout the Muslim world, of peculiar hybrid political ideologies marrying popular religious slogans with the familiar dualistic categories of Marxism and fascism has led to a rapidly increasing awareness of the practical contemporary pertinence of the Shaykh’s distinctive understanding of the proper relations between religious life and our wider political existence and responsibilities.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article in this *Journal* devoted to one of the most historically controversial and influential chapters of the Meccan Illuminations,<sup>2</sup> I concluded with the following telling quotation

1. This study was made possible by a research fellowship from the Lever-hulme Trust, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

2. “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Messianic Secret: From ‘the Mahdi’ to the Imamate of Every Soul”, pp. 1-18 in JMIAS, vol. XXX (2001). The chapter in question is

from Ibn ‘Arabī’s immense final chapter of “spiritual advice for both the seeker and for the one who has arrived (with God)” —a passage which beautifully summarises the fundamental political context of the Shaykh’s teachings:

You should uphold God’s limits with regard to yourself and whatever you possess, for you are responsible to God for that. So if you are a ruler, you have been designated for upholding God’s limits regarding all He has entrusted to you. For (according to a famous hadith) “each one of you-all is a shepherd, and responsible for his flock”, and that is nothing other than upholding God’s limits regarding them. Therefore the lowest form of “right rulership” (*wilāya*) is your governance of your soul and your actions. So uphold God’s limits respecting them until (you reach) the “greater *Khilāfa*” (divine stewardship)—for you *are* God’s representative (*khalīfa*) in every situation regarding your own soul and what is above it.<sup>3</sup>

As this concluding exhortation clearly indicates, perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Shaykh’s political teaching is the way it is essentially grounded in every human being’s unique experience and inescapable practice of the spiritual life, in those necessarily concrete processes of spiritual tests and realisation that are briefly outlined in the remainder of this study.

As such, the specific political implications of that teaching are discovered and slowly built up “one soul at a time”: through their initially individual discovery, followed by the wider creative processes of interpretation, communication and social cooperation that naturally flow from the effective expression of realised spiritual insight. Needless to say, this intrinsic, naturally unfolding political dimension of Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual teaching is radically different in almost every respect from those familiar

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number 366 in the *Futūhāt*, and the English translation of key passages of that chapter is now readily available in *The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I, ed. M. Chodkiewicz (New York, Pir Press, 2003).

3. Chapter 560: IV, 462-63. All references to the *Futūhāt*, unless otherwise specified, are to the frequently reprinted four-volume, Beirut, Dar Sadir edition (n.d.).

public systems, slogans, organisations and coercive, “top-down” images that are ordinarily associated with the political in today’s popular, journalistic discourse. Instead, the relevant political contexts of actual spiritual responsibility and realisation, as Ibn ‘Arabī pointedly emphasised in the passage just cited, always begin with—and necessarily remain actively rooted in—the most intimate interactive spheres of our family, colleagues, and other personally relevant communities.<sup>4</sup> So a closer examination of the contexts and processes of realisation presupposed in the Shaykh’s teaching should suggest radically new ways of looking at the actual human interplay of religion and political life not just in challenging contemporary situations, but throughout many earlier comparable historical settings.

Within its original Islamic context, of course, the wider political implications of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching turn on the problematic inter-relations between scriptural interpretation and various historical claims to interpretive authority—recurrent and fundamental political issues which tend to be as obvious to learned Muslim audiences (including most of Ibn ‘Arabī’s original readers) as they are invisible or opaque to many modern Western readers. In that respect, the dramatic recent expansion of worldwide interest in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings has repeatedly raised fundamental problems of interpretation which are often overlooked or passed over in silence by the scholarly specialists involved in this new wave of publications. However, teachers working with non-specialist audiences in different languages and cultures are constantly faced with the dilemmas posed by the fact that most students of the Shaykh today (whatever their language or culture) naturally approach those studies without much informed understanding of the original practical contexts—both historical and especially the “operative” or existential ones—which are needed for an adequate understanding of his writings as they were meant to be read and utilised by his original audiences. So in the absence

4. As the preceding quotation makes very clear (and as is dramatically illustrated throughout Ibn ‘Arabī’s own spiritual autobiography), these spiritually relevant contexts and communities should never be confused with such outward factors as either geographical or temporal proximity.

of that basic contextual background, such students are necessarily obliged to interpret whatever fragmentary studies of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings they do encounter either in terms of today’s very different prevailing religio-cultural categories and ideological frameworks—or else, in the case of academic specialists, in terms of whatever particular Islamic religious disciplines and received categories of thought they happen to take as their own implicit personal framework for approaching Ibn ‘Arabī.

Such basic hermeneutical problems, of course, have always been raised by the intentionally unique and intrinsically challenging, never-imitated nature of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own distinct rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> And they are beautifully illustrated in the familiar historical processes by which the more theoretical approaches to his work, throughout much of the Eastern Islamic world, became limited soon after his death to a particular set of philosophical and theological perspectives framed almost exclusively in terms of the detailed intellectual analysis of his *Fusūs al-Hikam*, in ways that have deeply shaped the wider public conceptions of the man and his writings down to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

This study, intended as a brief response to that need for proper contextualisation, attempts to outline—in language and examples accessible to non-specialist readers, as well as more scholarly audiences—some of the most basic features of that universal hermeneutical situation (i.e., one that applies intrinsically and

5. See the more detailed introduction to this dimension of the Shaykh’s work in my recent study of “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and ‘Translating’ the *Meccan Illuminations*”, Parts I and II, in *JMIAS*, XXXIII (2003), pp. 54-98, and XXXIV (2003), pp. 103-144.

6. See the basic outline of this historical heritage in the three-part study “Ibn ‘Arabī and His Interpreters”, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [JAOS], vol. 106 (1986), pp. 539-551 and pp. 733-756, and vol. 107 (1987), pp. 101-119; and “... *Except His Face*’: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Legacy”, in *JMIAS*, XXIII (199Ś), pp. 19-31. These two articles and several dozen related historical studies and reviews are now freely available in the web-based volume *Ibn ‘Arabī and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives*, which can be downloaded at the website of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society ([www.ibnarabisociety.org/ibn ‘Arabī](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/ibn%20Arabi)).

necessarily to the moral and spiritual testing situations, responsibilities and obligations engaging *all* human beings) which is presupposed in all of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, although it is most richly developed in his magnum opus, the immense “Meccan Illuminations” (*al- Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*). That essential hermeneutical problematic is beautifully summarised in a key eschatological passage near the end of chapter 64 (IV, 471-476 in the O. Yahya edition), where Ibn ‘Arabī has begun to prepare his readers for the proper approach to understanding his long following chapters on the inner spiritual meanings implicit within the fundamental acts of purification and worship (*asrār al-’ibādāt*).

There he explains that while that uniquely salvific Bridge through the “fires” of earthly existence—described in the famous hadith of the Intercession as being “finer than a hair, and sharper than a sword”—is none other than the “divinely revealed Path” (*al-sirāt al-mashrū’*), in reality the essential qualities of inspired insight and spiritual discernment needed to safely traverse that Bridge can only be discovered through each person’s own unique process of hermeneutical discovery or realisation. As he beautifully summarises that dilemma, the safe traversing of each of those fires, of each soul’s unique set of spiritual tests and learning experiences, requires:

... (true inner) knowing of the divinely revealed Pathway (*‘ilm al-sharī‘a*) in this lower life. For (without that true spiritual guidance and inspiration) the actual aspect of Right/Truth/Obligation (*wajh al-haqq*) with God applying to that particular problematic situation is not known. Nor do we know which of those striving to understand that has rightfully succeeded in reaching that (real divine meaning) in itself. So because of that (i.e., if we rely on external claims of authority) we are led to worship according to the predominance of their suppositions!

This constantly recurring spiritual dilemma, Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to explain, can never be resolved simply on the basis of the outward authenticity and relative accuracy of transmission of the verbal form of those teachings. For as he points out, those traditional accounts, even in their most accurate form, “can only give us the *form of words* of the (Prophetic) saying,” by “knowing

that the Messenger ... said this or did that” in some earlier, only imperfectly known circumstances. For the essential direct inspiration of the original divine intention actually pertaining to each relevant existential situation we freshly encounter is simply not accessible in terms of external claims, authorities, or alternative interpretations:

For what we are (really) seeking is *to know what should be understood* from that (original Prophetic) saying or action, in order to apply its (relevant) judgment to this (new) problematic situation, with absolute certainty.

Now to put this fundamental point as simply as possible, every writing of Ibn ‘Arabī’s can ultimately be understood as providing essential elements of the appropriate, necessarily individual practical response to that universal spiritual situation, or—to use his own pregnant expression—as a kind of comprehensively all-inclusive act of *nasīha* or “spiritual advice”.<sup>7</sup> So whenever we

7. See the extended illustrations of this principle in *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s “Meccan Illuminations”* (Louisville, KY, Fons Vitae, 2005). For the key historical role of this public mission of *nasīha* in the later, Eastern period of Ibn ‘Arabī’s life, see “Introducing Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Book of Spiritual Advice’”, *JMIAS*, XXVIII (2000), pp. 1-17—and in particular the following key autobiographical passage from his *R. al-Mubashshirāt* (translated more fully in “Some Dreams of Ibn ‘Arabī”, pp. 1-3 in the *Newsletter of the Muhyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, Autumn, 1993):

I saw in a dream that I was at the Sacred Shrine in Mecca, and it was as though the Resurrection had already begun. It was as though I was standing immediately in front of my Lord, with my head bowed in silence and fear of His reproaching me because of my negligence. But He was saying to me: “O My servant, don’t be afraid, for I am not asking you to do anything except to admonish [root n-s-h] My servants. So admonish My servants, and I will guide the people to the straight path.”

Now when I had seen how rare it was for anyone to enter the Path of God, I had become spiritually lazy. And that night I had resolved only to concern myself with my own soul, to forget about all the other people and their condition. But then I had that dream, and the very next morning I sat down among the people and began to explain to them the clear Path and the various evils blocking the Path for each group of them, whether the learned jurists, the “poor” (*fuqarā*), the Sufis or the common people. So every one of them began to oppose me and to try to destroy me, but God helped me to overcome them and protected me with a blessing and lovingmercy from Him. (For the Prophet) said:

look at the *Futūhāt* and his other works in terms of that unavoidable practical spiritual context, the effective roles and intentions of each of their highly diverse forms of expression and teaching eventually come into clear focus. While on the other hand, if we approach those writings in terms of any number of other purely intellectual or worldly-practical concerns, those same works can just as quickly shatter into a host of radically differing topics, approaches, perspectives, and subjects of analysis.

It may help then, in understanding why Ibn ‘Arabī’s works always look so very different depending on each reader or interpreter’s own particular hermeneutical perspective, to visualise this underlying situation in terms of the following schematic diagram, which places around the *outer* circumference of a circle what appear to us, when we approach them simply from the point of view of our determining conscious and especially unconscious “beliefs” (our *i’tiqādāt*, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own far-reaching sense of that term), as the many different constitutive elements both of the outward surviving forms of each revelation (*shar‘*), and of their corresponding intellectual interpretations and ongoing elaboration by later traditions. It is important to keep in mind that the handful of particular terms and elements listed here are purely for the purpose of illustration: the brief allusions here could easily be expanded indefinitely to include the appropriate terminologies of many different interpretive schools, ideologies, and historical traditions. Thus “inside” that circle represents the actual universal hermeneutical context of spiritual realisation,<sup>8</sup> whose most essential features are briefly outlined in the following section I.

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“Religion (*al-Dīn*) is admonishment (or ‘straight advice,’ *al-nasīha*), for God, for the leaders of the Muslims, and for the common people among them,” as is mentioned in Muslim’s *Sahīh*.

8. Throughout this study, “realisation” translates the multi-faceted Arabic expression *tahqīq* (as practised by the individual *muhaqqiq*). While Ibn ‘Arabī himself consciously uses a vast range of Qur’anic and other technical expressions to point to different facets of this fundamental human task, *tahqīq* was the single term which later Islamic spiritual and intellectual traditions most commonly used to convey all the equally essential elements of the actual *process* of spiritual realization. Thus it includes the search for



**Diagram: Hermeneutical Alternatives**

*Outside the circle* = “beliefs” (in Ibn ‘Arabī’s broad understanding of *i’tiqād*); the realms accessible to the physical senses and the limited intellect—and the corresponding historically evolved intellectual disciplines of interpretation.

*Inside the Circle* = the necessarily individual arena of actual spiritual realisation (*tahqīq*).



The remainder of this study is divided into four sections: (I) an indication of some of the most basic features of the “hermeneutical crucible” of spiritual realisation. (II) A brief discussion of the problematic role—and necessarily multiple levels and intentions—of Ibn ‘Arabī’s highly distinctive types of *writing*,

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what is truly Real and Right (*al-Haqq*); the intrinsic human obligations and freedoms following from—and indispensable for—our discovery of that Right; and the endless forms of inspired knowing and awareness, of enlightened spiritual intelligence, flowing from the appropriate actualisation of those responsibilities.

when his distinctive rhetoric and language is seen in terms of the contrasting realities and perceptions represented in this diagram. And continuing in Part Two, in the next issue: (III) An equally summary discussion of a few of the most familiar illustrations of that double-sided rhetoric which recur throughout the Shaykh's works. (IV) A short list of some of the key practical, political conditions—which are necessarily both obligations and corresponding freedoms—for spiritual realisation, which arise whenever individuals begin to take those interpretive responsibilities seriously. We conclude with a brief allusion to the recent, ongoing historical re-discovery of the manifold ways that Ibn 'Arabī's successors creatively applied and worked out, in their own radically differing historical and cultural situations, these wider responsibilities and political implications of his spiritual hermeneutics.

## I. THE CONTEXT OF SPIRITUAL REALISATION

To begin with, most people drawn to the serious study of Ibn 'Arabī—and certainly those who choose to devote many years to developing a deeper appreciation of his teachings—are typically already motivated by lifelong spiritual concerns, accompanied by fellow “spiritual researchers” (*muhaqqiqūn*). Being thus so immersed in the ongoing processes of spiritual practice and realisation, they naturally tend to take for granted the basic features of that spiritual hermeneutical context “inside the circle”, without paying much attention to the wider spectrum of ways the challenges of interpretation may actually arise or be framed for others less self-consciously involved in spiritual pursuits. One way of helping to break out of those unconscious assumptions, while also providing a very practical illustration of this situation of *spiritual* hermeneutics which in itself is already nearly universal in its inclusivity, is simply to consider one of Ibn 'Arabī's own favourite examples: the celebrated “hadith of the Questioning” at the Last Day.<sup>9</sup> In that frequently reiterated divine saying (*ḥadīth*

9. See the version attributed Abu Hurayra in Muslim's *Saḥīḥ*

*qudsī*), whose spirit permeates all of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing, God confronts a nameless, self-righteous person (i.e., each of us) on the Last Day and challenges him, in succession, with the statements: “I was sick, and yet you did not visit Me”, “I was hungry and you did not feed Me”, and “I was thirsty, yet you did not give Me to drink”—before going on to explain that if this person had actually responded appropriately to that human-divine Presence and painful need, each time he also “would have found God”, and his *own* divine solace, precisely in and through that fatefully neglected act of compassion.

Now when we bear in mind the full range of pervasive spiritual “maladies”, hungers and thirsts evoked throughout the Qur’an, and when we juxtapose the essential lesson illustrated here with the equally famous Prophetic hadith in which the culminating spiritual virtue of *ihsān* (recognising and realising what is both good and beautiful)—depicted as the ultimate aim of all Religion (*dīn*)—is explained as “worshipping God *as though you see Him ...*”, then the full universality of this “hermeneutical crucible” constituted by all our earthly life becomes dramatically apparent. For from that perspective, everything each person encounters in life, whether outwardly or inwardly, suddenly appears as a very concrete, infinitely demanding and illuminating, ongoing set of “private lessons” from God, necessarily calling for, evoking, and teaching each of the central spiritual virtues articulated by the Qur’an and the other divine revelations.<sup>10</sup> For as Ibn ‘Arabī

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(*birr*, 43), which is the source for the same hadith in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own *Mishkāṭ al-Anwār*, number 98 (full English translation by S. Hirtenstein and M. Notcutt in *Divine Sayings* [Oxford, Anqa Publishing, 2004], pp. 93-94).

10. See the more detailed discussion of this fundamental contrast, which permeates the entire Qur’an, between the difficult attainment of the true spiritual virtues and their illusory, socially validated substitutes, in the chapter on “The Mysteries of *Ihsān*: Natural Contemplation and the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur’an” included in the forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities*. For a shorter discussion of these same issues, in more metaphysical terms relating directly to the divine “Signs” and “Books” of creation and the human soul, see our Introductions to *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype, 2004) and to *The Reflective Heart* (n. 7 above).

repeatedly points out, each of us is always simultaneously on “*both sides*” of this recurring Encounter, gradually learning the transforming reality of divine Compassion through our own suffering as well as through our responses—and failures to respond—to the sufferings of others.

While some reflection is of course required at first to connect these revelatory teachings with their actual concrete illustrations in our own experience, once that indispensable connection has been established, over time even a little further reflection will quickly bring up the following essential features of this universal hermeneutical situation. Each person can quickly expand the very abstract points listed here:

- The “Unique Point” (*nuqta*) of time and circumstance: while the circle of the diagram above has to be drawn large simply to allow for the text surrounding it, everything in Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching—especially his principle of the “ever-renewed Creation” of all things at every instant—highlights the fact that our individual freedom and corresponding responsibility, the particular “interpretation” immediately required of us by God, necessarily relates to the very particular challenges of the unique situation, possibilities, and constraints posed for each individual by *this* particular instant. So when we are “lost in thought”, intellectual elaboration, or the many states of puzzlement or heedlessness, we are necessarily somewhere “outside” that circle (actually, that unique Point) of what is truly real.
- Those particular divine lessons that constitute each person’s spiritual life always involve a unique, intrinsically individual, and shifting set of highly specific personal “dispositions” and spiritual potentials, which Ibn ‘Arabī typically alludes to with a deceptively simple reference to the divine “Providential Caring” (*‘ināya*) that has brought each individual soul to this uniquely particular spiritual state and situation. We are all very well aware—and Ibn ‘Arabī repeatedly takes great pains to highlight this fundamental reality—that most individuals’ very different relative capacities to live “inside the circle”, to accurately perceive and respond appropriately, with true

*ihsān*, to the manifold sufferings of those all around us, seem at first glance to be something relatively innate or divinely given, without much relation either to study or conscious effort: indeed small children often seem far more accomplished at actually practising this fundamental spiritual responsibility than most adults.

- Within the hermeneutic circle of actual spiritual experience and testing, Ibn ‘Arabī loves to remind his readers that every particular spiritual testing situation is unique and never re-peated. Since our normal intellect intrinsically works with abstractions and general principles, and takes pride in its accumulation of “lessons” and knowledge, framed by its natural unconscious reliance on life’s “customary regularity” (*‘āda*) and visible, apparent causes (*asbāb*), this is a particularly pertinent lesson that we tend to have to rediscover again and again.
- The real process of spiritual hermeneutics always requires an ongoing dynamic interplay between the inexplicable “vertical” divine element of illumination (or grace, in all its forms) and our gradually maturing faculty of spiritual intelligence. That is to say, the actual process of realisation takes place in the constantly shifting interactions between each moment’s particular spiritual problem, the divine element of illuminating insight, the ensuing challenges of its practical application, and further reflection on the observed consequences and lessons drawn from that experience.<sup>11</sup>
- If we look more closely at the role of external “spiritual teachings” (of whatever source or expression) in the actual living context of each individual’s spiritual growth, we can repeatedly see that the actual spiritual process of this “existential hermeneutic” typically involves the effective simultaneous integration and application—most often implicit (i.e., not consciously or separately distinguished)—of many key elements that would appear intellectually, from “outside” the circle of realisation, as disparate and separate teachings. In

11. Again, see the detailed explanations and illustrations of this principle in the Introduction and throughout *The Reflective Heart* (n. 7 above).

Qur'anic terms, this reality is expressed in the fact that reference to the all-encompassing spiritual virtue of faith (*īmān*) always precedes its pairing with its spiritually appropriate, creative expression in the corresponding inspired right responses (*sālihāt*). Equally importantly, we quickly discover that the actual practice of spiritual hermeneutics in reality always involves the implicit application or “existential interpretation” of what are in reality a vast ensemble of related scriptural exhortations (Qur'anic verses, hadith, etc.)—just as the individually “named” spiritual virtues can rarely be separated from each other in real-life testing situations.<sup>12</sup>

- One telling “subjective” feature of the actual process of spiritual practice and hermeneutics which is particularly highlighted in some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most distinctive teachings, as in his characteristic presentation of earlier Islamic and Sufi tradition, is the gradually maturing awareness of the *divine* (in all its manifestations and effects) as the real “actor” and “interpreter”—an awareness expressed, for example, in the Shaykh’s characteristic doctrinal emphases on the reliance of the spiritually mature soul on silence, listening, surrender, spiritual repose, and so on.<sup>13</sup>
- Turning to the practical consequences of this hermeneutical context of realisation, and flowing from the uniquely individual factors highlighted in each of the preceding points, even a small degree of spiritual practice quickly reveals the typical uniqueness and contextual specificity of all those “answers” acquired in the actual process of learning and growth. That is why, as each reader of Ibn ‘Arabī must actually discover from his or her own experience and practical application of his teaching, while on the one hand virtually everything that the Shaykh wrote can be viewed initially as in some sense

12. See the detailed illustration and analysis of these spiritual principles in “*Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities*”, in the Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift issue, *Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol. 18 (1994), pp. 201-224; this is included in expanded form in the forthcoming *Openings: From the Qur'an to the Islamic Humanities*.

13. See the extensive illustrations of these basic principles of Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual psychology in Chapter 1 and 2 of *The Reflective Heart*.

“Ibn ‘Arabī’s *ta’wīl*” (spiritual interpretation of the Islamic scriptures)—at the same time, his writings cannot be usefully appropriated (explained, summarised, or reduced to simpler terms) except by *individually passing through the actual spiritual processes that gave rise to those particular “openings”*.<sup>14</sup>

- A second practical consequence of the actual realised practice of spiritual hermeneutics—and one that is constantly and quite typically emphasised by Ibn ‘Arabī (no doubt explaining and typifying his later epithet as “the greatest Master”, *al-shaykh al-akbar*)—is the gradual discovery of *expanding circles of responsibility and of spiritually effective “action”*, on different planes and in many outwardly different spheres of action. The remainder of this article focuses on some of those recurrent political dimensions of spiritual responsibility as they emerge, again and again, from that unique testing context of spiritual hermeneutics.
- One final noteworthy practical consequence of this particular hermeneutical context is of course a dramatically heightened awareness of the indispensable practical role and influences of *spiritually realised individuals*, again on many different planes. In other words, the actual operative process of spiritual realisation necessarily highlights the multi-faceted reality of *walāya*, which is probably the most distinctive and pervasive theme of the Shaykh’s writings and teaching.

Now while the brief description of each of these points has been phrased here in positive terms, one could certainly add to this list of the hermeneutical challenges and implications of spiritual realisation a heightened awareness of the limited practical efficacy of external writings, teachings, intellectual interpretations, and any number of other historical institutions ostensibly devoted to public religious teaching and guidance—and a correspondingly heightened awareness of the mysteries of the

14. And at that point, as Titus Burckhardt has ironically pointed out in a most memorable tale of his own youthful discovery of the *Futūhāt* (in his foreword to R. Austin’s translation of the *Fusūs al-Hikam*), one no longer needs Ibn ‘Arabī’s books to discover those actual inspired interpretations.

effective creative transmutation of those teachings into the lastingly effective forms of the Islamic humanities. The wider practical creative and political tasks, and the unavoidable conflicts, which are revealed by that recurrent tension are outlined in the remaining sections of this essay, beginning with their manifestations in some of the peculiar rhetorical features of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing.

## II. “STRADDLING THE LINE”: RECOGNISING THE MULTIPLE AIMS OF IBN ‘ARABĪ’S WRITING

Most of the points just made about the intrinsic features of the actual hermeneutical context of spiritual realisation initially tend to highlight the practically indispensable roles, at every stage, of living,<sup>15</sup> effective spiritual guides and teachers. Often that recurrent awareness, in the many branches of Islamic spirituality just as in other practical spiritual traditions, has led to an understandable knowing deprecation (as in the famous Taoist dictum “he who speaks does not know ...”) of the roles and claims of those religious writers and related formal institutions who happen to be acting primarily “*outside the circle*” of actual spiritual realisation. It is that sort of pejorative judgment that is sometimes evident, for example, in the cautious or even openly critical attitude taken by certain Sufi teachers, both past and present, with regard to the prolific and wide-ranging, highly intellectual literary output of Ibn ‘Arabī in particular. But that is surely not the whole story, as we can readily see simply by noting the ongoing wider spiritual influences—just as visible in our own day as in past centuries—of these and other written masterpieces of the Islamic humanities.

We have already devoted a number of more detailed studies to carefully illustrating and explaining the distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabī’s “rhetoric”—i.e., the complex relationship between his characteristic forms of writing and their different intended

15. An essential quality never to be confused, in any spiritual tradition, with simply “existing bodily on earth”.



audiences—in terms of his own explicit epistemological explanations and assumptions, since those issues are such essential prolegomena to a deeper appreciation of his writings and their intentions.<sup>16</sup> Within the context of this essay, though, the essential conclusion of those scholarly studies can be stated much more simply: all of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing—from the spiritually autobiographical, mysteriously veiled poetic and symbolic texts of his early life in the Maghreb on to the better-known longer works from his later Eastern period of self-consciously public and wide-ranging “wise-counsel” (*nasīha*)—tends to straddle the invisible “boundary” of the hermeneutical circle introduced above. As such, his writing simultaneously expresses two different “faces”, two very different aims and possibilities, depending on whether it is read from the perspective of prevailing beliefs and suppositions, or from the more demanding perspective of realised spiritual knowing.

On one level, for that relatively restricted set of readers and students who would already approach Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings from the perspective of their own spiritual practice and individual tasks of spiritual hermeneutics, his books, taken together, cover and exemplify virtually the entire spectrum of literary devices, topics, methods, and creative approaches to the problems of spiritual realisation that were developed within the preceding Islamic tradition (including many important elements of earlier Hellenistic and Arab heritages already deeply integrated in that tradition). Thus in this particular respect, just as each accomplished spiritual guide already integrates all those equally indispensable dimensions of the *actual ongoing* divine revelation so completely and profoundly that they are able to apply that inspired wisdom appropriately to each of the new and uniquely individual circumstances outlined in the preceding section— so likewise Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Futūhāt*, for example, might equally be described as comprehensive guidebook “for the person who has no spiritual guide”.<sup>17</sup> Or more realistically, given the intrinsic

16. See especially our recent studies cited in notes 5 and 7 above.

17. I.e., as a kind of “*Kitāb man la yahduruhu al-shaykh*”, to use the formulaic title of a longstanding Arabic literary genre of practical handbooks, usually found in such fields as medicine and law.

challenges, and uniquely universal perspectives, of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing, one could conceive of his extraordinarily demanding texts functioning ideally as a kind of ongoing “teacher of shaykhs”.<sup>18</sup> In any event, as recent historical and manuscript studies are increasingly revealing, there is no doubt that the widest circle of influences of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings has always been through the combination of their direct and indirect usage in the full range of actual situations of spiritual guidance and direction. This includes both the later institutionalised Sufi orders, as well as the wider, usually unacknowledged borrowing of his teachings and hermeneutics by preachers, teachers, and others working in more publicly visible arenas.<sup>19</sup>

In reality, though, Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings are for the most part unlike the texts typically associated with spiritual traditions in Islam in two very distinctive and pervasive ways. First, there is his characteristic insistence—deeply rooted in his own key spiritual experiences and understanding of his own personal destiny and mission<sup>20</sup>—on visibly and emphatically connecting every aspect

18. This particular role of the study of the *Futūhāt*, among the heads of many different Sufi orders in Ottoman Istanbul, down almost to the present day, is memorably described in Victoria R. Holbrooke’s “Ibn ‘Arabī and Ottoman Dervish Traditions: The Melāmī Supra-Order,” Parts One and Two, in *JMIAS*, IX (1991), pp. 18-35, and XII (1992), pp. 15-33.

19. For a number of telling contemporary illustrations of this phenomenon, see “Ibn ‘Arabī in the ‘Far West’: Visible and Invisible Influences”, *JMIAS*, XXIX (2001), pp. 87-121, and “... *Except His Face*: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Legacy”, *JMIAS*, XXIII (1998), pp. 19-31. As pointed out there, the usual historical assumptions and text-based methods of analysis and demonstration of “influences” are profoundly limited and inadequate when applied to contexts focused on actual spiritual realisation, rather than text-centred intellectual traditions. Those intrinsic limitations were further aggravated by the widespread prevalence after Ibn ‘Arabī’s death of polemical contexts in which Muslim religious writers often had compelling reasons not to mention explicitly their wide-ranging debts to his works. See, for example, the revealing later Egyptian Sufi illustration of this process in the study by R. McGregor, cited at n. 45 below [Part Two]. [This book is reviewed in this volume, pp. 141-6.]

20. The basic autobiographical framework of his self-conception as the “Seal of the Muhammadan Saints” is introduced in the excellent biographies by S. Hirtenstein (*The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual*

of his spiritual understanding and communication directly with its ultimate “roots” (spiritual, at least as much as historical) in the Qur’an and the Prophetic example.<sup>21</sup> Secondly,—and intrinsically rooted in the preceding distinctive feature—there is his more problematic insistence on connecting his distinctive spiritual insights and teaching with an endless host of related features drawn from virtually the entire extant body of both the religious and the philosophico-scientific learned traditions of his own time: i.e., with all the various intellectual disciplines lying “outside” the hermeneutical circle in our diagram here. Taken together, those two characteristic and relatively unusual features of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing mean that the greater part of it is largely inaccessible in its original form to anyone but the most highly educated and inquisitive intellectual elites, who were a tiny urban minority in all pre-modern settings. That is to say, most of his surviving books (and the immense *Futūḥāt* in particular) were carefully crafted so as to be fully accessible only for an unusually curious, highly motivated and spiritually inquisitive subset of those highly trained, fully Arabic-literate ‘ulamā’ and *hukamā’* who had already spent

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*Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabī* [Oxford, Anqa Publishing / Ashland, OR, White Cloud Press, 1999]) and Claude Addas (*Ibn ‘Arabī ou La quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris, Gallimard, 1989 [English translation by P. Kingsley, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993)]) and is explained in greater detail in M. Chodkiewicz’s *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabī* (Paris, Gallimard, 1986 [English translation by L. Sherrard, *Seal of the Saints: Prophet-hood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993)]).

21. To avoid any possible misunderstanding of this point, it is sufficient simply to compare Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings either with any of the classical early Sufi “manuals” (Qushayri, Makki, etc.) or with any of the masterpieces of the Islamic humanities in other languages (‘Attar, Rumi, Hafiz, and so on). All of the Islamic humanities, whatever their particular artistic form and cultural setting, are of course profoundly rooted in and inspired by the same scriptural sources. But what sets a work like the *Futūḥāt* apart from them is precisely Ibn ‘Arabī’s thoroughgoing pedagogical concern, at every stage of exposition, to relate his teachings and expressions explicitly and unambiguously to a scrupulously “literal” reading of the actual words of the Qur’an and hadith.

years acquiring the requisite formation and background in each of those demanding intellectual disciplines.<sup>22</sup>

To put the implications of all this more directly, in terms of the diagram introduced above, these two distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work together mean that one of the most consciously central audiences for most of Ibn ‘Arabī’s distinctive body of writing was the most highly educated—and therefore the most politically, culturally, and religiously influential—*intellectual* representatives of those diverse intellectual traditions scattered around the “outside” of that circle of spiritual realisation. The result of his persistent focus on those influential learned audiences, as we shall see in more detail below, is that these characteristic literary features implicitly reflect correspondingly *wide-ranging political intentions* that underlie—and potentially illuminate—these two crucially distinctive aspects of the Shaykh’s writing.

Ordinarily, of course, as was just as obvious in Ibn ‘Arabī’s own time as in our own, the learned practitioners of those intellectual disciplines, whether religious or philosophico-scientific, often have their feet firmly planted “outside” the circle of conscious spiritual realisation, being based instead in the narrowly self-involved pursuit of those intellectual traditions and their own this-worldly rewards.<sup>23</sup> But while Ibn ‘Arabī had a number of memorably appropriate things to say about such learned authorities

22. In this respect, the inherent challenges for modern translators and interpreters attempting to communicate Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching—discussed in detail in “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and Translating’ the *Meccan Illuminations*” (n. 5 above)—were already largely shared by most earlier, non-scholarly Muslim audiences interested in his work. Indeed the inherent obstacles raised by his characteristic use of so many highly intellectual and culture-specific forms of expression are immediately apparent to modern-day readers encountering the numerous recent translations of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works using the technical language of such traditional learned Islamic disciplines as ontology, cosmology, theology (of the divine “Names”, in particular), law, and so on.

23. See the detailed references to key aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s often openly critical attitude to the ‘*ulamā*’ of his time (and to his far-reaching understanding of the wider issue of their religious authority) that are brought together in “Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Esotericism’: The Problem of Spiritual Authority” *Studia Islamica*, LXXI (1990), pp. 37–64, and in the corresponding key

in his own day, his own creative, extraordinarily comprehensive lifelong response to their traditional claims and pretensions obviously goes far beyond the facile stereotypes of polemics and public controversy. First, the inventive rhetorical ways in which he evokes, presents and engages each of those learned religious disciplines clearly are meant to function as challenging, intellectually complex spiritual “reminders”. As such, they already make it possible to “convert”—i.e., to bring partially *inside* this hermeneutical circle of conscious spiritual realisation—at least some of the expert practitioners of those intellectual traditions. And in doing so, the Shaykh is boldly encouraging those influential religious scholars to turn their own teaching and practice of those traditional religio- intellectual pursuits into newly effective vehicles for awakening—in themselves and their spiritually apt students, and even among the wider mass of their “followers” (their *muqalladūn*)—a deeper awareness of the actual tasks and opportunities for spiritual realisation within their own particular historical circumstances.

Secondly, even among the larger group of those powerful practitioners of those traditional religious disciplines who remain (to borrow Max Weber’s memorable phrase) “spiritually tone-deaf”, Ibn ‘Arabī’s impressively thoroughgoing and profoundly original linkage of the practices, conditions and expressions of the spiritual life with every conceivable dimension of the Qur’an and hadith (and with the related normative social forms of their study and transmission) means that his teachings should have at the very least a cautionary and irenic effect in defending the necessarily creative forms and renewed expressions of active spiritual life. In other words, as a result of Ibn ‘Arabī’s distinctive approach, within those recurrent situations of political, cultural and social conflict that are historically inseparable from the effective expression of spiritual realisation and creativity, those publicly influential religious scholars and intellectuals who study Ibn ‘Arabī should at least be persuaded to evince a minimum of

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sections of chapter 366 of the *Futūhāt* (on the figure of the Mahdi) translated in *Ibn ‘Arabī: The Meccan Revelations*, vol. 1.

practical tolerance and open-mindedness with regard to unfamiliar spiritual activities and their creative manifestations.

We have only to think of the very different examples and lasting influences of such key religious intellectuals as an al-Ghazālī or an Ibn Taymiyya in order to envisage something of the full spectrum of practical possibilities that are raised here, and to recognise the ongoing political and historical importance of these far-reaching religio-political intentions guiding and underlying Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing. So in Part Two of this essay we turn to a few relatively familiar illustrations of how this intentionally multi-faceted rhetoric actually functions in the Shaykh’s writings (section III); and finally (in section IV) to briefly highlighting the Shaykh’s ongoing concern with the impressive range of fundamental political implications—both freedoms and corresponding responsibilities—inevitably raised by the wider process of spiritual realisation, as each generation of seekers rediscovers and wrestles with the familiar hermeneutical dilemmas posed by our existential situation simultaneously “inside” and “outside” our initial circle of spiritual realisation.