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IBN 'ARABI
AND THE WORLD TODAY
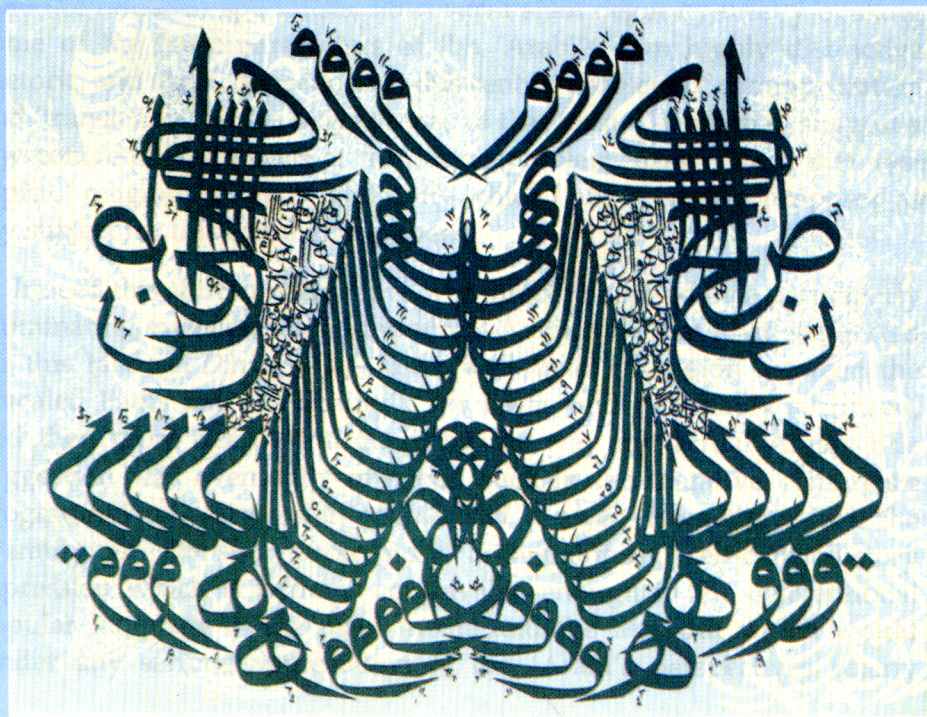
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Rhetoric and Realisation in Ibn 'Arabî :
How Can We Communicate His Meanings Today ?

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I would like to take advantage of this rare gathering of scholars and specialised students of Ibn 'Arabî from many parts of the world to elicit their own experiences, practical insights and responses in regard to this fundamental question which we are all constantly encountering in our teaching and writing about the Shaykh's work. For the benefit of those who are not such specialists, however, I shall begin by briefly evoking some of the basic parameters of Ibn 'Arabî's own highly distinctive rhetoric, and their connections to this central problem of communication and 'translation', in the largest sense of that term. Then I shall suggest a few concrete illustrations of this larger problem, drawn from that vast topic of religious diversity and unity which I had originally proposed as my subject for this conference paper.

Indeed this shift in perspective was directly inspired by a particularly illuminating experience with the actual Arabic title that I had suggested for this talk : *al-Dîn bayn al-sharâ'i' wa'l-haqîqa* ('Religion between the revealed Paths and the Reality'). For I was understandably surprised, and then more deeply intrigued, by the way my actual Arabic title suggestion was eventually mirrored back in the tentative conference programme as a discussion of *'ta'addud al-adyân'* (something like 'the plurality of *Dîn's*')-a profoundly and painfully self-contradictory expression which is perhaps conceivable enough in the conventional popular language of the mass media and the like, but which would render any serious appreciation of Ibn 'Arabî's perspectives utterly

impossible from the very start. No doubt this particular incident stuck with me precisely because it so vividly mirrors the most basic pedagogical tasks of clarifying fundamental issues of conceptualisation, terminology and methodology which one must undertake with beginning students of Religion (including Islamic Studies) at the beginning of each new school year. But coincidentally, it also exemplifies some of the most recurrent pitfalls and 'generic' misunderstandings which one constantly encounters in trying to communicate the actual meanings and intentions of Ibn 'Arabî's writing, today just as much as throughout the last seven centuries.

THE PROCESS OF 'REALISATION' (TAHQÎQ) AND THE CHALLENGES OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION :

The heart of Ibn 'Arabî's absolutely distinctive rhetoric-so distinctive that no one since has ever seriously tried to imitate its full gamut of 'instruments' and effects ! - lies in the intrinsic connection between, on the one hand, (a) the *multiplicity of perspectives* he intentionally evokes by his personalised use of a profusion of technical languages drawn from a host of fields and disciplines[1] ; and on the other hand, (b) the necessarily and intensely *individual process* of each reader's heightened, *careful attention to the unfolding particulars of their own spiritual life and experience.* The process and the intended effect of combining these two equally indispensable elements has traditionally been termed *tahqîq*, which can perhaps best be translated in English (in a word that at least preserves the twofold *intellectual* and *actively existential* dimensions of this process) as 'realisation'[2]. The *muhaqqiq*, or Ibn 'Arabî's ideal intended reader, is

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(1) On any given single page of Ibn 'Arabî's *Futûhât*, for example, we are likely to find him employing the distinctive technical languages of classical Arabic poetry, Arabic lexicography and etymology, the Qur'an, hadith, a wide spectrum of earlier Sufi authors, and several of the multitude of both the 'religious' and 'rational' Arabic 'sciences' (*'ulûm*) - almost always, in each case, with specific nuances and shifts of meaning (familiar enough to long-time students of the Shaykh) distinctively reflecting his own very particular uses of that language in the particular context in question.

(2) See the more extensive discussions of this key dimension of Ibn 'Arabî's writing in the Introduction to our recent *Orientations : Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype Press, 2003 ; originally published Sarajevo, El-Kalem, 2001), and in our essay on *Communication and Spiritual Pedagogy : Exploring the Methods of Investigation (tahqîq) in Classical Islamic Thought*, forthcoming in the **Proceedings** of First International Conference on the Heritage of Islamic Science and Philosophy, ed. H. Ahmed (Chicago, 2002).

that person who is constantly involved in the uniquely human (and 'human-ising') process of literally 'discovering' (*wujûd*) or 'witnessing' (*shuhûd*) the ultimately Real. That is to say, whoever is constantly engaged in perceiving and 'deciphering' the intended meanings of all the infinite, constantly unfolding 'Signs' that constitute every field of our actual individual human experience. This spiralling ascent (*mi'râj*) of realised spiritual perfection results from the ongoing revelatory interaction between the three equally essential elements of *tahqîq* : (1) our actions, experience, inspirations, and insights ; (2) their *observed* consequences ; and (3) the inseparable spiritual processes of reflection and deliberation (*tafakkur, tadabbur, dhikr*, etc.).

At the highest level, of course, such rare individuals-as most of us who normally teach large numbers of students would readily admit-are 'born, not made'. But wherever they may come from, they are naturally and spontaneously drawn to Ibn 'Arabî, and they almost immediately recognise and respond actively to the effectiveness and intended results of his distinctive language. Likewise - and again wherever they may originally come from - they also fairly quickly recognise the perennial relevance of Ibn 'Arabî's intended lessons in spiritual communication: i.e., about the ongoing necessity of carefully adapting the particular forms and language of the revealed Paths to the actual multiplicity and diversity of human types, the necessity of - to adapt al-Ghazâlî's favourite hadith - '*speaking to people according the capacities of their understanding.*'

But what about *everyone else* ? In particular, what about those two far more numerous human types which Ibn 'Arabî normally refers to as (a) the 'intellectuals', the 'people of *beliefs*' - all those theologians, philosophers and anyone else whose spiritual capacities and insight are intrinsically blocked by their exclusive reliance on their own superficial intellectual schemas and concepts, both unconscious and conscious ; and (b) the 'people of *taqlîd*', that vast majority of implicitly 'religious' people who are (or so he pretends ?) quite happy simply to *do* what some other social 'authority' tells them is good and right and proper, without thinking or reflecting at all ? Now as scholars and historians of Islamic thought, of course, we can readily explain how Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric constantly takes into account those two other vast groups in his own time, as he carefully explained at length in his introduction (*muqaddima*)

to the *Futûhât*[3] or in many even more famous passages of his *Fusûs al-Hikam*.

But as translators, professors, teachers, advisors, citizens, parents - in all the other roles of guidance, interpretation and practical application of the divine teachings which we necessarily take on in the course of life - we cannot so easily walk away from asking and at least provisionally responding to that question of effective communication in all sorts of unavoidable practical situations, indeed wherever the relevant practical ethical, political and spiritual responses are demanded of us. Indeed, one suspects that Ibn 'Arabî's ultimate purpose in writing so many books was very much connected with raising precisely those types of highly *practical* spiritual questions, whose specific individual forms and contexts are constantly changing - to use his own terminology - with the 'ongoing re-creation' of the world at every instant (*tajdîd al-khalq*). Certainly this is an equally unavoidable problem for students and 'communicators' of Ibn 'Arabî's intentions today, wherever they may be living and working, even if our own outward circumstances are often apparently quite different.

To put it as simply as possible, anyone conscientiously aiming to communicate Ibn 'Arabî's intended meanings in our own time must constantly be wrestling with the following two fundamental practical questions, which must always be answered in terms of the actual capacities and starting points of the *particular* 'audiences' (readers, listeners, students, etc.) with whom we are actually intending to communicate :

1. *How can we best awaken and ensure* that spirit of *tahqîq* which is so utterly indispensable for genuinely understanding any of Ibn 'Arabî's intentions ? Practically speaking, our responses to this foundational demand always challenge us to ask whether in fact

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(3) See our translation and study of the key passages from his *muqaddima* in *How to Study the Futûhât: Ibn 'Arabî's own Advice*, pp. 73-89 in the **Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî : 750th Anniversary Commemoration Volume**, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury/Rockport, Element Books, 1993). [Downloadable versions of this and all our other non-book published studies and translations cited in the following notes are now readily available on the Internet at **www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi**]. Chapter 12 of Ibn 'Arabî's *Fusûs al-Hikam* (on Shu 'ayb and the 'Heart') is one of several classical locations for the extended discussion of this same issue among the long line of famous commentators on the *Fusûs*.

people are somehow invariably 'locked into' one or another of the three basic groups we have just discussed (i.e., the *muhaqqiqûn*, the 'intellectuals' or people of beliefs, or the people of *taqlîd*) - or whether people in either of the less prepared groups can eventually be awakened and moved to higher degrees of active realisation, using appropriately adapted forms of communication ? Here it is particularly fascinating, when we look at the immense range of historical 'influences' of Ibn 'Arabî's works and teaching, simply to examine the extraordinary spectrum of later Muslim authors' often highly creative rhetorical responses to that question-for example, in the very different writings and styles of the Jâmî, 'Erâqî, Mullâ Sadrâ, or Jîlî.

2. The second constantly unavoidable problem is *how to avoid 'premature conceptualisation'* ? That is, how can we effectively communicate the actual intended meanings of Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric without falling into the manifold dangers of presenting him to unsuspecting readers as a kind of 'theologian' or 'philosopher,' in sense of an intellectual who has formulated and is arguing for a particular intellectual, purely conceptual 'system' of thought or discrete ideas and beliefs which he means to 'prove' or 'disprove'. Since the majority of 'reading publics' likely to encounter works by and about Ibn 'Arabî these days, in almost any language, are most commonly primarily 'intellectuals' and 'people of beliefs' (or of *taqlîd* !), rather than Ibn 'Arabî's actually intended *muhaqqiqûn*, this is an ever-present obstacle to communication in our own time. For as we all know, our attempts to 'explain' and guide new readers through Ibn 'Arabî's distinctive and intentionally challenging rhetoric almost inevitably remove many of the safeguards (the *'gardes-fou'*) he so carefully devised to discourage unqualified readers and students of his work[4].

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(4) Of course one finds a similar apparent blindness to the fundamental philosophical importance of an equally distinctive rhetorical form (and parallel assumptions) in the centuries of subsequent discussions of Plato's dialogues - beginning already with Aristotle ! - which somehow pretend to discuss 'Plato's doctrines' in complete separation from the actual dramatic contexts in which he always raises and contextualises each major philosophical issue. (We return to the deeper rhetorical parallels between the role and aims of 'realisation' in Plato and Ibn 'Arabî at the end of this paper.)

ONE 'CASE STUDY' : APPROACHING THE UNIVERSALITY OF DÎN

Now all these distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabî's 'rhetoric of realisation' - and their corresponding challengers for moder - day 'translators' in any setting-are especially evident when we turn our attention to any particular facet of his understanding of the reality of we unthinkingly call 'Religion' (*al-Dîn*). Indeed, as soon as we even think of this subject, we immediately observe two highly typical rhetorical features that clearly extend to all of the Shaykh's work.

The first of those features, which he constantly reiterates, is that the clearest and most accurate symbolic expression of his intended meanings is to be found *precisely in the exact literal expressions of the Qur'an itself* (and, of course, in a somewhat restricted set of 'parallel', metaphysically oriented hadith drawn from the classic Sunni collections)[5]. Interpreters who attempt to understand or present Ibn 'Arabî's teachings as a particular, separately identifiable set of 'interpretations' of the Qur'an-as so many have tried to do through the centuries - all qu ickly sink into a tangled mass of ever more complex (or else appallingly reductive) yet ultimately empty verbiage[6]. For nothing could be more contrary to the *muhaqqiq's* constant concern with moving from the particular revealed words and symbols toward the direct perception of the *ever-present, recurrent patterns and realities* to which those symbols always point. And the first thing any genuine *muhaqqiq* realises-again as Ibn 'Arabî constantly reiterates, as summarised in one of his favourite hadith

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(5) It is important to note that, by implication, any attempt to parallel Ibn 'Arabî's approaches to 'realisation' and his teachings within the context of other religious traditions must be equally careful to distinguish between accumulated historical interpretations (of the sort which Ibn 'Arabî implicitly is constantly questioning and de - constructing in his own Islamic tradition) and those particular elements of each tradition which come closest to reflecting the actually revealed Sources of the tradition in question. One will readily notice how carefully the *muhaqqiqûn*, the 'Ibn 'Arabî's' of other religious traditions, have also proceeded in this regard-most notably in the extraordinary parallels to be found throughout the near - contemporary (and almost equally influential) case of the *Zohar*. Within the subsequent Islamic tradition, perhaps the most dramatically effective and telling illustrations of this procedure are to be found throughout Rumi's incomparable *Mathnawî* (*Masnavî*).

(6) Perhaps the richest, most elaborate illustration of this profusion of symbolic expressions and technical language, carefully abstracted from its original rhetorical contexts, is of course S. al-Hakîm's monumental *al-Mu'jam al-Sûfî*.

expressions : *rabbî zidnî 'ilman* ('O my Lord, increase me in knowing !') - is that the seeker is never the one actually in charge of providing and orchestrating those particular experiential lessons which begin to unfold the actual meanings of the revealed symbols, and that the process of *tahqîq* does not 'end' at all[7]... This absolutely essential reality of ongoing 'co-operation' between every *muhaqqiq* and all the particularly relevant personal manifestations and influences of the 'Divine' is of course reflected directly in four of the most central, recurrent features of Ibn 'Arabî's distinctive rhetoric (each directly mirroring the language of the Qur'an), from his earliest writings to his last : i.e., the constant ambiguity of pronominal reference (between the 'Divine' and the apparent partial 'subject') ; his constant phenomenological reliance on the *'interactive'* fifth and sixth Arabic verbal forms ; his insistence on the carefully 'etymological' de-construction of our imagined conceptual meanings in favour of the open-ended, concrete phenomenological richness of the actual revealed Arabic roots ; and his intentional 'scattering' (*tabdîd*) of the key metaphysical teachings, insights, premises, and allusions which the qualified reader must bring together in order to grasp the highest levels of intended meaning.

Secondly, the particular case of the reality and all - encompassing unicity of *Dîn* is a particularly helpful illustration of the fact that Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric of realisation can never be adequately or meaningfully reduced to a set of 'separate' (or conceptually separable) teachings or 'doctrines.' Just as the Revelation (and the Reality), in all Its infinite forms and expressions, is constantly 'said' to be One, so likewise the goal of accomplished realisation - as Ibn 'Arabî constantly and unambiguously insists, beginning with his earliest (and more openly autobiographical) writings - is necessarily a single *comprehensive* unitive 'vision', albeit one unavoidably expressed linguistically and

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(7) In this regard, see especially Ibn 'Arabî's own autobiographical allusions to his decisive early experience of 'union' with the spiritual Reality of the Qur'an, in chapter 367 of the *Futûhât*, translated in *The Spiritual Ascension : Ibn 'Arabî and the Mi'râj*, in the **Journal of the American Oriental Society**, vol. 107 (1987), pp. 629-652, and vol. 108 (1988), pp. 63-77 [now reprinted in Ibn 'Arabī : *The Meccan Revelations* (New York, Pir Press, 2002)]. The importance of this revelatory experience is discussed at length in the classic biographical studies by S. Hirtenstein and C. Addas, and its ongoing influence is illustrated, of course, in all the available translations of Ibn 'Arabî's surviving writings.

symbolically from different partial perspectives. In pedagogical *practice* - that is to say, where our goal is actual *understanding*, and not particular dialectical struggles (*jadal* or *kalâm*)[8] - particular verbal 'formulae' (whether traditional phrases, or one's we create for our own purposes of communication) can only be practically useful, in the end, as a kind of 'springboard' or tentative starting point for each student's own necessarily individual process of *tahqîq* in the relevant areas of their own spiritual experience. If we start treating those formulae as self-sufficient concepts somehow usefully 'knowable' - or worse, 'demonstrable' - on a purely intellectual, conceptual level, we soon discover that such notions eventually become both empty intellectual 'idols' and (for others) the targets of pointless polemics.

Incidentally, this is not to deny the intellectual usefulness of Ibn 'Arabî's ideas in helping us intellectually to organise and comprehend quite usefully vast realms of historical 'data' about human spiritual and religious experience. Indeed, as we have indicated in a number of studies, their usefulness in that regard has led modern researchers from many initially quite different fields to turn to him for inspiration in developing the intellectual foundations for the growing disciplines of the

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(8) Which often have their own socio-political purposes, of course. There is now an extensive and rapidly growing historical literature on the seven centuries of ongoing polemics, which eventually developed in virtually every region of the Islamic world, using Ibn 'Arabî's name and a few empty slogans (almost never evincing the slightest serious understanding of his work) to attack or defend local struggles for religio-political power and authority. For a broader contextualisation and overview of those controversies, see our *Ibn Arabî and His Interpreters*, in **the Journal of the American Oriental Society**, vol. 106 (1986), pp. 539-551 and pp. 733-756, and vol. 107 (1987), pp. 101-119, and the planned volume on *Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters : Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives* [now available in downloadable format at **www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi**], which brings together the JAOS article with seven more recent related studies on this theme and more than twenty reviews of translations and books related to this controversy.

For Ibn 'Arabî's own elaboration of his still highly pertinent 'political philosophy', see the extended translations to be included in our *Paths to the Real : Freedom, Creativity, Diversity and Tolerance in Ibn 'Arabî's Philosophy* and - while awaiting the completion of that book, our earlier overview of those ideas in *Ibn 'Arabî's "Esotericism" : The Problem of Spiritual Authority*, pp. 37-64 in **Studia Islamica**, LXXI (1990), as well as in *Ibn 'Arabî's Messianic Secret : From "The Mahdî" to the Imamate of Every Soul*. In **Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society**, vol. XXX (2001), pp. 1-19. [Both also accessible on the website mentioned above.]

study of Religion and the nascent science of spirituality[9]. However, it is safe to say that those drawn to serious research in those fields are already 'muhaqqiqûn' by nature and inclination, and that actual understanding in these areas cannot be reached simply through the accumulation of masses of historical 'evidence' for and illustrations of Ibn 'Arabî's individual teachings (or their equivalents in other traditions). Likewise, even a relatively minimal degree of acquaintance with the history of any religious tradition quickly highlights the universality of the ongoing processes of interpretation, distortion and transformation always involved in any human appropriation of spiritual teachings anywhere and at any time. But as any teacher in this field quickly discovers, the mere acquaintance with such observable historical processes does not necessarily move every student on to the discovery and recognition of the truly universal parameters and processes of spiritual learning and growth (which of course requires an experienced awareness of the corresponding dimensions of spirit and time). Instead, those unable to access their own spiritual 'tasting' (dhawq) are just as likely to retreat into the various alternative forms of socio-political reductionism, relativism, or more fiercely defensive adherence to this or that arbitrary set of protective 'beliefs'-all endemic in the modern 'media culture', increasingly even in university-level settings.

IBN 'ARABÎ AS 'PHENOMENOLOGIST' OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE :

These basic pedagogical realities highlight the fact that the awakening of spiritual intelligence (tahqîq), for most people, must necessarily begin with - and, in any case, always continues to be accompanied by - the progressive inner awakening of each student's individual spiritual

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(9) For a broad overview of this remarkably widespread creative adaptation of Ibn 'Arabî's thought in a number of contemporary academic and more practical spiritual settings throughout the world, see our study of *Ibn 'Arabī in the "Far West"* : *Visible and Invisible Influences*, pp. 87-122 in the **Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society**, XXIX (2001), as well as the longer version of that study to appear in the **Proceedings** of the International Conference on 'Sufi Thought and Inner Dimensions of the Islamic World: Ibn 'Arabi and His School in Asia and Africa,' ed. Y. Tonaga et. al. (Kyoto, 2002 ; exact title and publisher to be announced). The many earlier parallels to this movement in the wide range of influences and uses made of Ibn 'Arabî's works throughout the eastern Islamic world are summarised in **"Except His Face..."** : *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn 'Arabi's Legacy*, pp. 1-13 in the **Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society**, vol. XXIII (1998). (Additional discussions and illustrations in the studies cited in the first paragraph of n. 8 above.)

awareness and the actual intelligible lessons that process always involves[10]. And it is in this pedagogical context that the particular rhetoric and teaching procedures of Ibn 'Arabî's *'Meccan Illuminations'* (*al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*) are especially full of powerful lessons for teachers (and students) today - especially in their radical contrast to the range of abstract philosophical, even theological, conceptual schemas and doctrines which quickly became associated, in earlier Islamic tradition, with the study of his *Fusûs al-Hikam*. For the reader of the *Futûhât*, at every stage, finds the intellectual (conceptual and symbolic) allusion to spiritual realities and processes inextricably embedded in what, to the best of our knowledge, is probably *the most extensive and detailed phenomenology of the actual spiritual life to be found in the literatures of any world religion* - certainly of the Abrahamic traditions[11]. Indeed, one of the most cogent 'demonstrations' of Ibn 'Arabî's own central assertions of the *universality* (in so many relevant senses!) of the teachings he is conveying is precisely the fact that his allusions and intended meanings are still so immediately, so powerfully accessible to *muhaqqiqûn*, of every age, coming to him from the entire global range of spiritual traditions, and not uniquely to students approaching him from within those later 'Sufi' traditions with which he was often later associated - especially by the well - known range of later clerical critics often acutely aware, in their own revealing ways, of the wider import and compelling implications of his understanding of (their and every) Revelation.

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(10) Of course, as Ibn 'Arabî himself frequently remarks, those souls who already have been granted that necessary spiritual 'preparedness' (*isti'dâd*) spontaneously flock to the likes of Ibn 'Arabî (and his equivalents in any tradition), in whatever forms may be accessible to them. (Cf. the well-known hadith that begins *'The spirits are armies drawn up'*)…

(11) This fact certainly is not unrelated to the far-reaching and multi-faceted influences of Ibn 'Arabî's thought in the ongoing elaboration of the disciplines of the study of religion and the science of spirituality (n. 9 above). Since the appreciation of this central dimension of the *Futûhât* for most readers necessarily requires extensive translations from the *Futûhât*, we have collected a number of related studies of Ibn 'Arabî's gradual development of central spiritual themes in that work, incorporating key translated passages, in a number of recent studies to be included in our forthcoming volume *The Reflective Heart : Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn 'Arabî's 'Meccan Illuminations'* (Fons Vitae, 2003 ; the earlier published versions of the first five studies, from the **JMIAS**, are already available at **www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi**, until the book itself is published), and in at least two further collected volumes planned to appear in coming years.

Anyone who has delved into even the first major section (*fasl al-ma'ârif*) of the *Futûhât*, which today is much more readily accessible in the edition of O. Yahya, will realise how impossible it is to 'summarise' adequately the rhetorical procedures by which Ibn 'Arabî gradually draws his readers - wherever they may begin in that oceanic work ! - into the ongoing process of spiritual intelligence, into the essential work of confronting their own (and alone, for them, *truly 'real'*) specific spiritual experience with the vastly wider spiritual phenomenology (including the particular forms of each revealed Path [*shar'*]) developed and alluded to on every page. Indeed any attempted or purported 'summary' of this process, as we pointed out at the beginning, would (a) leave out its most essentially 'real' elements ; (b) create the usual delusions of 'premature conceptualisation' ; and above all, (c) pretend to 'foreclose' and foretell what every *muhaqqiq*, at any stage, knows all too well can only be a most partial and tentative grasp of an infinitely greater picture. (Perhaps we should also add here that Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric of 'scattering' his most essential teachings - his Qur'an-inspired procedure of '*tabdîd*' - also includes elaborate safeguards intended to repel and drive away any literate readers who might lack the essential qualifications of a *muhaqqiq*)[(12)]. All of these are key reasons why we, along with other experienced teachers and translators of the *Futûhât*, are increasingly aware that the time has now come to begin the vast co-operative enterprise of producing reliable, adequately annotated translations of ever-larger complete sections of those '*Illuminations*'. For while the experience of reading through longer complete passages of Ibn 'Arabî's text is often daunting, tiring, puzzling and sometimes even boring - reactions which (quite intentionally !) would normally drive away less motivated or properly oriented and prepared readers - still access to those extended passages (and through them, to the rhetorical procedure that actually structures and informs them) is absolutely essential if

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(12) See especially our studies of '*Ibn 'Arabî's Esotericism...*' (n. 8 above) and of his *muqaddima* to the *Futûhât* (n. 3 above), as well as the more thorough discussions throughout M. Chodkiewicz's monumental *Le Sceau des saints : prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabî* (Paris, 1986) - although these fundamental Qur'an - inspired rhetorical features are in fact illustrated in detail throughout any of the available extended translations of the *Futûhât*, in ways that are both more extensive and more apparent than in the *Fusûs al-Hikam* (especially for the vast majority of readers who for centuries have only approached the *Fusûs* through more philosophic commentaries).

modern-day students are to discover the deeper phenomenological foundations, intentions and relevant lessons underlying all of the Shaykh's teaching and writing.

In conclusion, for those who do have at least some direct experience of the opening Section (chapters 1-73) of the *Futûhât*, I would simply like to point out the distinctive way in which Ibn 'Arabî gradually introduces his attentive and dedicated readers to the different facets of the global reality of *al-Dîn* in the course of these introductory chapters of that immense work. Granted, someone seeking to reduce his treatment of that all-encompassing reality to a series of conceptual 'topics' or 'doctrines', in the style that we associate with classroom lectures or academic theses, could of course 'isolate' - with great effort, and by completely leaving aside Ibn 'Arabî's own rhetoric and procedure - a number of distinctive themes. Beginning with the most 'abstract' and moving toward the more 'concrete' practical expressions, those themes (which any worthy 'intellectual' could go on to subdivide and analyse almost indefinitely) would certainly include : (1) the widest framework of metaphysical (both cosmological and eschatological) teachings concerning the role of the 'Spirit' and of all creatures (including terrestrial humanity) in the ongoing divine drama of Self-manifestation, Love and Self-awareness ; (2) the 'Reality of Muhammad' ('Light', 'Intellect', etc.) as a universal, timeless spiritual reality encompassing both the historical manifestations and the likewise timeless metaphysical 'realities' partially manifested through the succession of earthly messengers and prophets ; (3) an even more practically detailed account of the universality of the sources, principles and functions of earthly spiritual guidance (including notably more recent *awliyâ'*, as well as the messengers and prophets) ; (4) the corresponding unfolding of our own individual spiritual life, understood as 'heirs' to and through the pleroma of that guidance, in all its forms ; and finally - but really only another perspective on the preceding - (5) the unfolding relations of 'divine service' (*'ibâda*) between the actual ever-present realities of the 'revealed ways' (*al-sharâ'i'*) and the all-encompassing divine Reality (*al-haqîqa*), above all as they are gradually revealed through the actual spiritual practice of the revealed prescriptions (purification, prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage).

But in fact, anyone who actually reads these opening chapters of the *Futûhât* must immediately acknowledge, first of all, that such grand themes are never introduced 'by themselves' - as something to be learned or believed - but rather by means of and profoundly embedded in the closest possible attention to three constantly present (and inseparably interwoven) *'fields' of phenomenology* : (1) in the interplay between the actual detailed language (beginning with actual 'letters' and their constituent parts !) of the Qur'an, and its detailed expression in the actions and teachings of the Prophet ; (2) in the detailed experiences and expressions of countless other 'Friends of God' (both famous and completely anonymous) ; and (3) in the even more detailed allusions to the author's own spiritual experience. So those readers encountering these three infinitely complex phenomenological 'fields - and here we *literally* follow Ibn 'Arabî's own language evoking his own vision that yielded all these 'openings', in adapting the universal language of those games of quest and challenge which today fascinate our children in every culture - initially must encounter a series of closed 'doors,' of apparent barriers to which they must seek out the unique and indispensable 'keys'. Therefore *none* of this writing is seriously meaningful - at least as anything more than a bizarre mytho-poetic 'puzzle' - until each reader actually begins to discover the mysteriously unfolding connections between their own immediate spiritual experience and the relevant particulars of each of those at first apparently 'external' phenomenological fields.

I use the word 'mysterious' here quite intentionally. For otherwise those who have not seriously engaged the *Futûhât* itself will naturally assume that I am speaking of the ways any writing - any story, myth, symbol, poem, or drama - normally 'mirrors,' more or less effectively, something of the inner states and experiences of those who read or witness it. But the particular language of the *Futûhât* - as of the Qur'an which constantly underlies and informs it - goes far beyond that familiar interaction with art and scripture. These particular words, as readers have discovered for centuries, have a far more *active*, illuminating, penetrating and 'opening' effect. Just as with Plato's dialogues, this extraordinary awakening of an unexpectedly far - reaching, illuminating, and eventually transforming *'active* intelligence' is a mystery that happens regularly even 'in translation', with all the added difficulties

that translations understandably involve[13]. One sign of the mysteries of Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric is that this unique type of writing can - or indeed *must*-be *re-read* repeatedly over time : each time one comes back, thinking that this or that passage is familiar, entirely new meanings are suggested and revealed, and points that one had ignored or taken for granted suddenly take on new significance...

At this point, of course, any more adequate illustration and analysis of these points would have to take us into the detailed literary equivalent of 'therapy' - into actual processes and ongoing cycle of spiritual work, illumination, and insight. But hopefully we have at least suggested a few of the distinctive features of Ibn 'Arabî's rhetoric that help to account for its extraordinarily lasting effectiveness, its truly universal accessibility and appeal, while at the same time suggesting practical pedagogical lessons and challenges which we all need to take to heart in the particular circumstances of our own time.

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(13) In this respect, seriously reading the *Futûhât* is not unlike the central practice of 'suhba' (spiritual companionship with a true master) in Sufism or other spiritual paths : what at first seems like the day-to-day experience of 'ordinary life', with its familiar cycles of sleep, devotion, eating, work and so on, eventually takes on new, completely unsuspected higher levels of meaning - insights and awareness that often are only discernible once one is no longer in the immediate presence of the guide in question, when we 'return' to encounter the routines of everyday life from a transformed perspective.